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Advising From a Constructive Developmental Perspective

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Advisors can enhance development by, first, identifying students' meaning-making assumptions and, second, challenging those assumptions while offering support as students struggle to increase the complexity of meaning making. Constructive developmental theory is offered as a useful framework from which to encourage greater student ownership of the educational planning process. Methods of assessing and enhancing development are suggested. Two cases that depict advising from the constructive developmental perspective are offered.

"If you want to change, you've got to do it from the inside," says Rita, the title character in the film ***Educating Rita,*** a fledgling college student questioning her working-class assumptions about what and whom to believe. The norm in her neighborhood has been to marry early, have children, and stay close to home, both physically and psychologically. Rita's sense that life offers other possibilities has led her to a faculty tutor's office. In the course of the film, the viewer observes Rita's struggle to bridge two worlds. This struggle precipitates a personal revolution for her, as Rita's college experience helps her find her own voice rather than continuing her reliance on the authority of her parents, her husband, and her peers. In so doing, she shifts her fundamental way of making meaning from an other-orientation to authoring her own beliefs and values.

Rita's journey is like that of many undergraduates who arrive at an advisor's door ready, but not yet able, to leave home. What is the potential role of the advisor in this change "from the inside"? Our position is that a major advising task is to trigger and support such development intentionally. How can such change be mapped so that an advisor has guidelines for assessing advisees' meaning assumptions and for intentionally encouraging more complex and adaptive change? The constructive developmental theory of Robert Kegan (1982) is offered here as a promising framework for understanding college students in the predicament of changing from the inside.

The notion of advising as a developmental intervention is not new. From the developmental perspective, the advisor assists the student to address larger questions of life and career goals in the context of educational planning (O'Banion, 1972; Walsh. 1979). To this end. student development theories have provided a foundation for understanding the student's developmental needs. For example, from the psychosocial "task" perspective (e.g., Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1968), advising can be viewed as an activity aimed at helping students increase their autonomy, improve their sense of competence, learn to manage emotions, establish identity, and define a sense of purpose (Thomas & Chickering, 1984).

Paralleling the psychosocial framework is the cognitive developmental perspective. In a sense these theories explain the cognitive conditions that enhance psychosocial development. Building on the Piagetian tradition, cognitive developmental theories attempt to describe regular, progressive changes in hbw adults make meaning of experience. Both general theories of cognitive development (e.g., Basseches, 1984; Piaget, 1954) and theories that apply to specific domains, such as those of attitude toward knowledge acquisition (Perry, 1970) and of ethics (Kohlberg, 1973), have emerged. Drawing from this tradition, Kegan's constructive developmental theory (1982) may be particularly useful, because of its breadth and applicability to multiple domains, in helping advisors enhance development. Our purpose in this article is to describe this theory and to explore potential advising applications.

Cognitive Developmental Theories

Cognitive developmental theories follow the Piagetian, or constructivist, tradition in which human beings are viewed as active organizers of experience (Mahoney, 1991). In this tradition it is suggested that the cognitive structures, or "tacit assumptions" (Polanyi, 1966), that individuals bring to the world can be more or less adaptive for the challenges of living. Cognitive developmental theories describe development as movement from less to more complex, complete, and adequate ways of interpreting reality (King, 1990). With greater cognitive development, students become more internal in their

decision making and better able to critique their own thought processes. For example, in Perry's scheme of epistemological development (1970), students often move from a reliance on authority, such as an advisor, for answers (Dualism) toward an internal center of decision making (Commitment in Relativism) during their college years. Cognitive developmental theories, in general, serve as a framework that advisors can use in promoting greater self-directedness and internality in students.

Constructive Developmental Theory

In constructive developmental terms, the central act of human "being" is that of meaning making (Kegan, 1982; Kegan & Lahey, 1985). Experience is not so much a result of what happens to us, rather it is the sense we make out of what happens to us. The particular lenses students use also give rise to their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting over a wide range of functioning—in the classroom, in the residence hall, in extracurricular activities, and in relationships. It is these lenses that are of interest to the college advisor.

Kegan (1982) describes constructive development as potentially proceeding through six stages or "balances" that successively reflect a changing understanding, or "construction," of the relationship between self and other throughout one's life. In brief form, the first three balances, which are typical of childhood, are (a) the Incorporative, in which the infant cannot differentiate the self from the world; (b) the Impulsive, in which the self is synonymous with the impulses; and (c) the Imperial, in which there is a more enduring construction of the self, but in which need-embeddedness leads to the desire for control of the environment.

Adults typically have the potential to move through the remaining balances: (a) the Interpersonal, (b) the Institutional, and (c) the Interindividual. It can be argued, then, that most college students usually make sense of experience from the framework of one of these balances.

The Interpersonal Balance

Kegan (1982) describes Interpersonalism as an embeddedness in others' definitions of what is important, an external reference for what constitutes reality. The Interpersonal balance is typical of adolescence, when the customs, norms, and meanings of reference groups such as parents and peers are the source of one's self. For a person in the Interpersonal balance, Kegan questions the very existence of self as it is ordinarily conceived (i.e., a self that authors its own theories and perspectives).

Because, in the Interpersonal balance, there is no coherent self that can regulate or take a perspective on reality, college students who are embedded in this way of making meaning have trouble independently defining their purposes outside of relationships. Although Interpersonally embedded college students may typically be torn between loyalty to a parental standard and loyalty to a peer standard of valuing and behavior, in either case meaning is derived from others. Even those college students who readily, even eagerly, exchange parental standards for peer standards remain reliant on an Interpersonal meaning system. The transition for many new students from parental to peer control can be seen as a pseudoindependence. Preliminary research (McAuliffe & Neukrug, 1992) suggests that over 50% of undergraduates may make meaning from the Interpersonal balance.

The Institutional Balance

Movement to this self-authoring balance depends on having experiences in which the old balance is challenged by a different and structurally more advanced way of making meaning. Relying on others' definitions for oneself may become untenable at some point. Externally derived definitions seem no longer to work when, for instance, students are asked, "What is your opinion?" "When will you study?" or "What major are you going to choose?" Such challenges occur in class, in the residence hall, and, of course, during the advising process.

If they experience a college environment that provides a balance of challenge and support (Sanford, 1966), students will emerge from their early college years with their own voice (i.e., speaking from the Institutional balance). This meaning-making system can be described as Institutional insofar as students now seek to run themselves as established, fairly fixed institutions, driven by self-defined theories of how to act and think. Rather than choice of major and of classes being codefined, codetermined, and coexperienced, Institutional students' choices are more self-authored and autonomous. In short, the person develops an identity and can

say, "I have relationships," rather than, "I am who those around me say I am." The Institutional balance is liberating; students need no longer rely on others to define the good because they can use internal standards to make lifestyle, political, career, and values choices.

The Interindividual Balance

The limits of the Institutional balance are probably evident. If I am an Institutionally embedded person, I run myself as an enterprise, somewhat unresponsive to both internal and external voices of dissonance, voices that might help adjust my course. I identify myself with my ideology, my chosen major, my political beliefs. Self-perpetuation in my current form is ultimate for me. Because ideology and self-perpetuation have become ends unto themselves, students in the Institutional balance lack the capacity for self-correction, and they may feel a troubling remoteness and isolation. In the aforementioned film, Rita expresses the self-absorption of the Institutional balance when she says, "I'm busy enough finding myself without worrying about somebody else." For many Interpersonally embedded individuals, although the discovery of the Institutional self is a triumph, it is also limiting and less adaptive than a more receptive, open self-system might offer.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the next stage of meaning making, the Interindividual balance. Let it suffice that beyond Institutional meaning making lies the possibility of greater openness to experience, of developing a dialectical relationship with the world, one in which evolving commitments can be made and reviewed. The Interindividual balance enables one to be more responsive to new information, to seek contradiction, to be an open system able to hear and incorporate disagreement. The Interindividual meaning maker can develop more adaptive views, lifestyles, relationships, and career choices through ongoing synthesis of new experience. Preliminary evidence (Bar-Yam, 1991; McAuliffe & Neukrug, 1992) indicates that achievement of the Interindividual balance is relatively rare, with most adults dwelling in or between the Interpersonal and the Institutional balances. Kegan (1991) suggests that a small percentage of adults achieve Interindividuality in a relatively full sense and that no one under 35 has been found to use this balance consistently.

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From the evidence that traditional-aged undergraduates enter college in the Interpersonal balance, we might speculate that many new students look to others for correct ways of thinking and acting, that the source of their meaning lies in the introjected expectations of parents, peers, and others. Evidence that many new students bring a somewhat external perspective, with significant reliance on authority for knowledge, parallels other cognitive developmental theories. These theories describe new students as largely expressing conventional moral reasoning (Rest, 1988) and maintaining a somewhat Dualistic view of knowledge (Kurfiss, 1983). One of college's major tasks is helping students develop an internal source of decision making and move away from slavish reliance on others as definers of what is important. Evidence-based decision making is required in many endeavors, from career choice to professional work decisions. In the broader scheme, it is essential to democracy that a large segment of the population be able to make evidence-based decisions of what is right and desirable.

With Interpersonally embedded advisees, the advisor's task is to, in Piaget's term, "disequilibrate" them from inadequate (for adulthood) meaning-making systems by challenging them to seek evidence and to place authorship for choices within themselves. Many forces will seem to conspire to maintain Interpersonalism, such as group-think peers or parents who expect adherence to family and cultural norms. Nevertheless, the advisor, from the constructive developmental perspective, must challenge Interpersonally embedded individuals' expectations that others will supply them with decisions.

The pain of such transition is evidenced by depression in new college students (Kegan, 1982), as they are frequently torn between loyalty to the old order (family expectations) and the new one (peers, professors, and others). Here the advisor can play a central role in enhancing development. In Kegan's terms, it is the task of the advisor, and of the college educator in general, to be both (a) a "culture of confirmation," one that "holds," or supports, students in their predicaments and (b) a "culture of contradiction," one that challenges them to embrace the scary independence of emerging adulthood. Development can be stifled if one of these cultures is emphasized to the exclusion of the

other. For example, some challenge but fail to support students when they provide little structure in lectures, assignments, and course format. In this sink-or-swim type of college teaching, new students may be overwhelmed with challenge, with few study skills and knowledge-gaining attitudes to keep them afloat academically. An emphasis on challenge may lead to lower self-esteem, failure, and attrition.

Conversely, peer groups (e.g., fraternity/sorority members or residence hall mates, much like coworkers for the noncollege individual) may provide too little challenge to think for oneself. They may be too confirming of the present Interpersonal construction of the self, reinforcing group norms that emphasize conformity. Confirmation without contradiction stymies development; in this case, the college experience will not challenge the student to become an independent thinker who can eventually establish interdependent relationships and come to reasoned decisions as a family member, business colleague, or citizen in a democracy. Specifically, the advisor must challenge new students to use evidence for decisions and to be open to new information, eventually making commitments in the choice of courses, major, peers, political affiliation, and values, to name a few domains. From orientation through initial course selection and in the new student seminar, the advisor can, in Kegan's term (1982), "culture" new students by providing an "optimal mismatch" (Huebner, 1979), that is, by combining support and challenge.

The advisor thus confirms new students in their transitions and contradicts their old, Interpersonally embedded ways of knowing. Given a knowledge of the developmental framework, the advisor can set about intentionally to disequilibrate the student. Constructive developmental theory can be specifically applied through early assessment and extended orientation. Following is an illustration of how these two activities can trigger constructive development.

Assessing Development

Before or during the initial advising interview, the student's meaning-making framework can be assessed. The only formal procedure currently available is the extensive Subject-Object Interview (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1985). However, for advising purposes, informal methods can provide clues. For example, during the interview the advisor might probe with such questions as "How do you know that [e.g., you have chosen an appropriate major]?" "What is at stake if you [e.g., ask your roommate to turn down the television so that you can study]?" or "What would be the cost of [e.g., asking your instructor for clarification on a grade]?" In each of these cases the source (self or others) of the student's meaning making can be surmised.

More formal methods of cognitive developmental assessment can be used at the initial student orientation. Among the appropriate instruments are the Scale of Intellectual Development (Erwin, 1983), the Learning Environment Preferences Inventory (Moore, 1987), and the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1988). Although the first two provide a measure of intellectual development and the last one assesses moral development, all of these tests indicate meaning-making frameworks. With further probing, these tests can provide clues to students' constructive development. Other measures to assess a student's degree of self-authorship are the Identity Scale (Marcia, 1966) and My Vocational Situation (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980). Each of these instruments assesses development in the direction of more self-defined goals and personal standards. Some combination of the above measures integrated with information from an interview might provide a basis for advising.

Extended Orientation

The above might be integrated into the early part of an extended orientation seminar, such as one modeled after the Freshman Year Experience program (Gardner & Jewler, 1989). This type of seminar can enhance constructive development. Although a student can be held, or supported, during the seminar by a confirming structured group environment, instructors must also challenge by demanding that, in Kegan's words, "the person assume responsibility for [his or her] own initiatives and preferences" (1982, p. 119).

Two examples of course segments that challenge in this way are (a) assertiveness training that requires students to identify their needs as separate from those of others and (b) decision-making and goal-setting activities that ask students to author their own plans. Similarly, encouraging students to think independently about when, where, and how to study; about their interests; about how to spend their time; and about values and moral choices all promote

the self-authoring that is characteristic of the Institutional balance. The extended contact of an orientation seminar can provide support and structure while the challenges of new ways of learning, choosing, and relating are provided. The student is less likely to be overwhelmed. Two cases that illustrate constructive developmentally oriented advising follow.

Case Illustrations

Bill

This first case illustrates the danger of not being alert to students' constructive development. It involves two advisors and an 18-year-old freshman, Bill, intent on pursuing a demanding curriculum in engineering. As his advisor first met with him, Bill reported being set on engineering because "a lot of my friends from high school are in engineering, and we are going to take the same classes and help each other. My dad says it's a good field to get into." Here we hear a common refrain for new students: "My center of decision making is not within me; it is parceled out to others." The advisor who is alert to constructive development might recognize the power of these statements as clues to an embeddedness in an Interpersonal framework for meaning making. However, Bill's advisor, rather than following up on the constructive developmental clues, merely told him how to plan his engineering curriculum. When they met later that term to schedule second semester courses, Bill gave no indication of academic problems. At the end of the first semester, the advisor was surprised to find Bill on academic probation. He called Bill to discuss the effects of his grades on his plans for the following semester. Bill attributed his performance to first semester jitters and felt confident that he could significantly improve his grades. He was adamant about continuing with his major because his best friends were also engineering majors, and he couldn't bear the thought of not being in the same classes, pursuing the same goals. The advisor, although troubled by Bill's reasons for choosing engineering and his poor academic performance, was pleased with Bill's career certainty, foreclosed though it was (Marcia, **1966).**

During his second year, Bill was still on academic probation. By coincidence, he received a new advisor, one who was concerned with development as well as with course selection. She probed Bill's reasons for choosing engineering with pointed Subject-Object Interview questions (Lahey et al., 1985) such as, "How do you know that this field is good for you?" and "What might be the cost to you of choosing contrary to your friends' and parents' preferences?" From Bill's responses, she surmised that his meaning source lay in others and that he was embedded in an Interpersonal framework. She challenged Bill to discover and act on his own academic interests and offered to help Bill explore his needs through interest testing and other activities. With the potential of academic suspension staring at him, itself a major disequilibrating event (Piaget, 1954), Bill was ready to consider new ways of making choices. His advisor further explored Bill's basis for choice of major and referred him to a counselor who continued the task of helping Bill make choices for himself. Subsequently, Bill selected an education major because he discovered his strong interest in working directly with others in a teaching capacity and pursued that major successfully. Bill later said, "1 can't believe that I almost let what my friends were doing determine my career."

The second advisor's awareness of Bill's Interpersonal meaning-making system enabled her to target broader change. Without the constructive developmental perspective Bill might have arbitrarily chosen another major based on outside influences, with similarly unfortunate results. In contrast, constructive developmental theory can alert the advisor to a student's potentially inadequate construction of who is in charge. Although a crisis can also be a vehicle for change, as it was in this case, and readiness to hear the need for change is critical, the environment, in the form of the advisor, can trigger reconsideration of sources of meaning. Later, similar disequilibrium might occur for Bill in favor of including others in meaning making, in the form of the emergence of an Interindividual self-in-relation (Surrey, 1984) that is neither absorbed nor threatened by others.

Donna

Taking one's meanings from others can lead to an incongruent choice of major, as in Bill's case, or can even result in the sacrifice of the very educational endeavor upon which an individual has embarked, as shall be shown here. It is not uncommon for older, returning students also to be embedded in an Interpersonal framework. For example, Donna, a 39-year-old homemaker, presented herself at the Advising Center

with the concern that "I need to add something to my life. My kids are in middle school, and I'm feeling lost now that they don't need me so much." Donna was, however, inarticulate about what she wanted from college, referring vaguely to things she had read on second careers for homemakers and empty nest syndrome. She hoped that the advisor would set her in the right direction. Her inarticulateness seemed to reflect an Interpersonal meaning system. The paucity of evidence for a career choice presented by some advisees is frequently a clue to this lack of a self-authored position. Further confirming Interpersonal embeddedness, Donna added that she didn't want her husband to know that she had come to inquire about enrolling, as she thought he'd disapprove. On the positive side, her arrival on campus reflected a glimmer of developmental movement.

Much of the advising work with Donna centered on challenging her to define her authentic needs and to weigh the costs of meeting both her family-related needs and her desire to take a role outside the home. Specifically, the advisor asked Donna to imagine the consequences of not returning to school. The advisor also helped her meet other returning students, especially those who modeled self-definition (i.e., Institutional meaning making). Additionally, providing self-assessment tools and interest inventories supported the self-empowerment impulse Donna had expressed in her initial interview. That impulse might have remained unexpressed, however, without the support and challenge of the advising activities.

In contrast to many traditional-aged students, for a significant number of returning women what is important may be determined not so much by their peers, but by their partners, children, or employers. Interpersonal meaning making begins and ends with others, to the exclusion of self (Gilligan, 1982). The unbalancing, or disequilibrating, event for Interpersonally embedded students may be a divorce or separation, a nest suddenly empty of children, or the realization that a current occupation is no longer satisfying. With the support and challenge available from women's centers, support groups, women's studies courses, and empathic advisors, these students may learn to rely on themselves to define what is good and what is important.

Remember that achievement of the Institutional self is not an ultimate goal. The overdifferentiation of the Institutional balance is itself a risk, in that the separateness of finding one's own truths can be isolating and can lead to inflexibility. Development requires that individuals proclaim their Institutional selves for a time before allowing others in again. The overindividuated imbalance of the Institutional self seems necessary until the individual's readiness and the environment again meet to challenge the single-mindedness of the Institutional balance. By knowing the "plus-one principle" (Rest, 1973), which suggests that individuals can comprehend a developmental level one stage beyond their current one, the advisor can support the sometimes strident voice of Institutional meaning making as a necessary condition for further development. For Donna the future challenge will be to include others who are important to her in a new way in which there is a self to share. According to Kegan (1982), only through first achieving Institutional self-definition can a person eventually achieve the interdependence of the Interindividual balance because, through reaching the Institutional balance, there is now a self to share. The developmentally aware advisor can be a central figure in this transition.

Conclusion

Constructive developmental theory provides a framework that can inform the direction and the content of advising. Movement from an other-defined Interpersonal balance to a self-authored Institutional balance is a major developmental task for most college students. Advisors can contribute to this development by assessing students' meaning-making frameworks during initial interviews and orientation sessions and by subsequently challenging Interpersonally embedded students to reconsider their reliance on making meaning exclusively through others. No one experience will provide the disequilibrium that topples Interpersonalism; we may, as advisors, merely raise the shade a crack and let in the glint of light that there is another way to make meaning.

Both the individual and the environment must conspire to topple Interpersonalism. The result? Individuals whose source of valuing is within themselves, students who can participate in relationships but not be enslaved to the meanings of others, students who can choose a field of study in unison with their own voices. Again, we hear Rita late in the film declare to her faculty tutor, who has been suggesting

course choices to her, "I'll make a decision; I'll choose!" In this sense it is our task as advisors to undermine our own authority. As Rita declares to her advisor, "I'm educated now — I know what wines to buy, what clothes to wear, what books to read — and I can do it without you."

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