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POSTFORMAL RESISTANCE TO CONCEPTS OF "HIGHER" DEVELOPMENT

SARA NORA ROSS
Dare Institute and ARINA, Inc., Bethel, Ohio, USA

It is recommended to acknowledge and attribute normalcy to a range of possible reactions to concepts surrounding stages of development, particularly "higher" ones. Neutral, negative, and positive reactions have origins that differ considerably by stage of hierarchical complexity. Reactions of resistance require analysis because resistance is a source of misunderstanding or conflict. Using hierarchical complexity concepts and scoring to analyze these reactions demonstrates that people using postformal thought at stages 11 and 12 may seem to resist the very concepts that explain their complex thought. Analyses indicate resistance is directed at misunderstood or sometimes-conflated elements, rather than developmental concepts themselves.

Bombarded as we are with new information and ideas, some new ideas just do not seem to matter very much. The motive for this analysis is the perspective that understanding the new ideas of hierarchical complexity and postformal thought *does* matter for our individual and collective world futures. The first purpose of the article is to acknowledge and attribute normalcy to possible negative reactions—resistance—to the concepts given dedicated attention in this issue of *World Futures*. The next aim is to make sense of a range of possible reactions to the concepts, whether neutral, negative, or positive. The approach is to *use* hierarchical complexity concepts to interpret reactions *to* the concepts. Greater emphasis is placed on resistance, because it is a source of both misunderstanding and vital energy.

It is hoped that this special issue, taken as a whole, suggests the ubiquitous role of hierarchical complexity in "how things work" in our world. Even its ubiquitous presence may not, however, lead to comfort with the idea that there are greater levels of development or higher stages of performance. For some people, the idea of going through such stages and developing more complex behaviors may conjure up different images, assumptions, biases, or concerns. For some, it seems that the image of *higher* is common. This may be because behaviors' complexity becomes

Address correspondence to Sara Nora Ross, Dare Institute, 3109 State Route 222, Bethel, OH 45106-8225, USA. E-mail: sara.nora.ross@gmail.com

greater as people develop. It may be because any time numbers are assigned to stages in a developmental scheme, the numbers run *upwards*. When we do not like an idea for any reason, it is common to resist it (dismiss it, ignore it, forget it, argue about it, attempt to discredit it, etc.).

This article begins by inviting readers' reflection on how they are possibly already familiar with the concept of hierarchical complexity, based on lived experience as adults. Some possible generic answers are proposed to answer the question: Why resistance? The main section offers theoretical interpretations of possible reasons, and behaviors associated with them, for both non-resistance and resistance at different stages of hierarchical complexity. It concludes with ideas about the implications for the future of resistance to these concepts.

LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HIERARCHICAL COMPLEXITY: SO, WHY RESISTANCE?

Adults reading this are likely able to reflect on their development through life to this moment. Educational experience is ideal to reflect on. Through each grade of school, students develop skills to perform tasks as well as develop capacities to understand increasingly complex concepts in different subject areas. They learn how to write numbers and letters before they can learn to do simple arithmetic and to read. They learn their native language before non-native languages. They learn algebra before calculus. In any domain of effort, advances in human development follow such a pattern: acquire the skills and capacities to work with tasks and ideas of increasing complexity. Use those as a foundation to continue the pattern as increasingly complex demands must be faced.

One may ask: Why would there be resistance to the notion of stages of development when publicly sanctioned learning environments, our schools, are designed for developing students? That is, class by class, grade by grade, they are developing more complex thinking and other capacities and are publicly celebrated with graduation events when finished.

Several casual explanations are possible. For instance, people like me who grew up when Piaget's work was being reported around the world might assume people stop developing by the time they are in their late teenage years. His work seeded the assumption that development ends around the age of 18: thus, logically, adults do not develop. Another possible explanation may be the opinion that it is normal to develop via school attendance, but not beyond or outside of it, because that is what school is for. There may be a belief that school develops *what* we learn, but *how* we learn is identical for everyone. Those who hold that belief may therefore believe it unfair to say people are different (the Model of Hierarchical Complexity agrees that *how* organisms learn is a universal process, yet stipulates that its process is affected by many conditions). It could be that when we become adults, we enter a mostly competitive world; the idea that some may develop more than others may be troublesome if it adds unwanted pressure.

Because the premise of this writing is that postformal thought and hierarchical complexity concepts *matter,* the subject of resistance to these concepts deserves

more than such casual conjecture. Theoretical explanations are in order, and are offered in what follows.

RESISTANT AND NON-RESISTANT REACTIONS
TO THE CONCEPTS

If the idea of "higher" stages of developmental complexity engenders resistance or seems troubling, to what sorts of factors might we attribute this? Resistance and non-resistance to these concepts show up in people who use different stages of hierarchical complexity to react to or think about the concepts at any particular time. This may depend on the context in which the subject arises. Behaviors that demonstrate resistance and non-resistance take different forms, depending (a) on the domain in which the subject or triggering event arises, (b) the stage of development with which a person operates in that domain, and (c) other contextual factors that can vary widely. The sections that follow sort out theoretical reasons for adult behaviors associated with both non-resistance and resistance to this subject. "This subject" refers to terms and concepts of postformal thought, hierarchical complexity, and stages of development.

Non-Resistance to the Concepts

At **Concrete stage 8**, such terms, and the concepts behind them, are meaningless. They do not have anything to do with the visible "stuff of life" with which this stage is concerned. The words engender no reaction because they are like a foreign language.

At **Abstract stage 9**, one may hear of or read something about these concepts, and may think they make sense (depending on how the abstract reasoning interprets them). This sense-making could apply, for example, to different age groups moving through classes in school, or to judging criminal behavior to be at a low stage of moral development. For example, a teacher at this stage may have rote knowledge of development but the ideas are not applied in non-school domains. This is because the concepts are obtuse at the abstract stage. They have little or nothing to do with the broader "stuff of life" that matters. If notions of "higher" and "lower" show up, they take the form of dualistic classifications such as groups approved/disapproved, rich/poor, good/bad, and friend/enemy.

At **Formal stage 10**, active attraction to the concepts may come from interpreting developmental stages as linear progressions. This may help to make logical sense of things. The concepts are likely to be used as a measuring stick of progress, for example, in climbing a ladder to some kind of success. They may be interpreted as a way to self-judge one's status, including having achieved the highest stage of development possible. Developmental stage knowledge may be misused to feel superior, for example, to levy judgments that create superior in-groups (highly developed and usually one's own) and inferior out-groups (less developed and never one's own). Some people and prevalent cultures at this stage may attribute maximum worth to things that are "higher" or "greater"—whether wealth, power, influence, knowledge, popularity, virtue, spirituality, or a host of other goals to achieve.

At **Systematic stage 11**, routine acknowledgement of the concepts may show up, not least because researchers and theorists at this stage have probably done the most to launch developmental science, for example, Piaget himself. The way systematic reasoning works can result in the concepts "ringing true," with or without self-reflection on one's own development.

Similarly, at **Metasystematic stage 12**, concepts of development and increasing complexity, once given explicit attention, often ring true with—and help make sense of—observations of self and others' behaviors, priorities, and perspectives, as well as the notion of change, itself. This reasoning is often at least intuitively aware that there are different levels of complexity reflected across diverse worldviews and perspectives. It is prone to reflect on its own and others' former ways of (a) thinking about an issue, (b) judging a behavior, (c) embracing a social norm, and (d) assuming how the world works. It can observe that in some domains of life, former characteristics have been "outgrown." Thus, developmental concepts usually ring true at this stage.

Resistance to the Concepts

Systematic Stage 11.   If there is real or apparent resistance to the concepts, it seems to show up in a particular context that happens to trigger a postformal, **Systematic stage 11** reaction. This does not contradict the foregoing section about the routine acknowledgments possible at the Systematic stage. Routine acknowledgments indicate that generalities are accepted. By contrast, the particularities of a situation can be occasions for real or apparent resistance when developmental concepts are involved. This is because real-life situations often introduce multiple concerns that people want to address. Systematic stage reasoning makes connections between concerns and draws conclusions. When a situation is complex, systematic conclusions are often partial; that is, they do not necessarily take into account and coordinate all possible information or situational factors. This is because, at this stage, there are limits to how much can be considered at one time. An actual example may illuminate this point. Some people who had used the Model of Hierarchical Complexity in their own work once gave me strong criticism for vetting among peers a draft that used the Model to propose an approach to a particular subject. One of the criticisms was that "no one should have to swallow your perspective on the progression" of the subject discussed in the draft. Because the person doing the criticizing was a user of the Model, clearly it was not the concepts themselves that were found objectionable. In that situation's context, the person was concerned that readers of the draft may feel they had to "swallow my perspective" while they had the right to their own perspective. The concern was not about the concepts. It reflected a perception about others' possible perceptions in that situation. It would be a mistake to interpret the critique as resistance to developmental concepts or the Model.

My analyses to date suggest that apparent resistance to developmental concepts is rarely so simple or literal. More often, it seems to be about something else entirely, something more complex. There may be exceptions I have not yet encountered. Either way, sources of resistance can be listened for carefully and

inquired into (and for good communications' sake, they should be!) rather than judged or pigeonholed. It is always possible to misinterpret why there is resistance to anything.

For example, some people and cultures hold egalitarian principles in higher esteem than comparing or measuring competencies. At the same time, for some holders of egalitarian preferences, the concepts of hierarchical complexity may be misunderstood or simply appear to run against other valuable connections they make. For example, they may prefer that everyone be evaluated the same way as a remedy or counterbalance to unjust practices or uneven circumstances (e.g., racial or ethnic discrimination, economic disparity). Such reasoning should not be judged as simple resistance to measures or developmental concepts.

Finally, there can be perceptions that these concepts imply linear, lock-step development that infers no room for individuality, creativity, and uniqueness. Such perceptions may invoke the repugnant image of Asimov's "marching morons." Indeed, it seems that in the stages of development of coming to understand developmental dynamics at all, there is this stage of perceiving unremarkable linearity. This runs counter to prevalent Systematic stage awareness that unique individuality is the norm, not the exception. As Torbert (2000, p. 253) observes, initial impressions of developmental theory as linear are "belied by actual experience within any of the later action-logics," that is, stages of performance. It is hoped that the foundations offered in this issue lay to rest any such misperceptions about the dynamics of development that nonlinearly play out task by task.

Metasystematic Stage 12.   Resistance to these concepts by **Metasystematic stage 12** reasoning that I have encountered and analyzed also has more complex roots than simple resistance. What is resisted is not the concepts themselves, but how the concepts have been used (or rather, misused or abused) in some contexts. Sometimes this distinction is not noticed, leaving both dimensions fuzzily conflated. To interpret this kind of resistance, it is important to tease apart two systems: (a) the system represented by the concepts (developmental dynamics) and (b) the system of applying or misapplying them by others. As mentioned earlier, developmental concepts can be used to support superiority complexes and in-group/out-group distinctions that are divisively destructive. Metasystematic stage reasoning is more likely to realize the necessity to productively coordinate diverse perspectives to accomplish worthy goals. This pragmatism is valued over any exclusionary attitudes or practices that would sabotage such goals. Such pragmatism underlies resistance to any notion that developmental concepts imply lock-step linearity. It is more likely to recognize that dynamic nonlinearity, rather than linearity, accounts for observed realities in self, others, and the world.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF POSTFORMAL RESISTANCE TO THE CONCEPTS

The foregoing analyses indicate that where resistance to these concepts appears to show up, it stems from postformal thought processes. They also suggest that such resistance is tethered not to an accurate understanding of the concepts themselves,

but to various other concerns and/or to misperceptions. Conceptual misperceptions can arise from at least two sources. The first is that inaccurate conceptual information was conveyed in the first place. The second is that, as with every task, there is a developmental process of transition steps required to grasp and apply new concepts. This is especially true when a comprehensive general theory of developmental change is the subject.

It is normal to first have a mechanical, linear understanding of a newly introduced system of thought, that is, a theory. If no further effort is expended, a mechanical understanding will endure. If that presumption of lock-step linearity underlies resistance, then resistance is likely to endure, too. However, if further learning, reflection, and application ensue, then it is more likely that the interactive developmental dynamics of hierarchical complexity will become apparent. In that case, resistance to misperceived attributes of development would dissolve, its place taken by more complex understandings of these processes.

A position reflected in this issue of *World Futures* is that this over-challenged world sorely needs the complex analyses, processes, behaviors, and policies possible with higher stages of postformal thought. Bateson (1972, pp. 468–469), in discussing getting to the point where every habit is imbued with (his equivalent of) Metasystematic stage 12 thinking, asserted that step "is not an easy one. And quite seriously, I suggest to you that we should trust no policy decisions which emanate from persons who do not yet have that habit."

If one is resistant to developmental concepts for any reason, would the resistance carry over to active efforts to *foster development* in individuals and social systems, even if it equipped them to meet challenges effectively and nonviolently? Might such resistance oppose proposals to actively foster the development of postformal thought itself? Further development of postformal thought would, itself, transform resistance by enabling more Metasystematic stage 12 grasps of the concepts.

Our premise is that the development and application of postformal thought indeed needs to be actively fostered to inform and benefit humanity for the sake of our collective future. It is from that platform that we will see the comprehensive and healthy behaviors, analyses, processes, policies, and technological efforts—and their integration—that may successfully coordinate challenges in our world. That platform is essential to implement far more complex understandings of how our local to global worlds work. It is hoped that this analysis, and this special issue as a whole, contributes to shifting any resistance to these concepts and frees up that much more vital postformal energy to address collective challenges.

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