

## The State of the Art on Perry and Epistemological Development? An Introduction



**William Graves Perry Jr. (1913–1999)**

Photo courtesy of Mary Perry via M. Suzanne Renna

In the early period of the field, *Positive Adult Development*, William Perry stood out as an interesting case. Maslow had a very rough notion of the development of reinforcing properties of outcomes. Kohlberg (1969) had developed two clearly post-formal stages, stage 4 (systematic) and stage 5 (metasystematic). Erikson (1982) had developed adult periods. Perry (1972), working at Harvard University with undergraduates at the *Bureau of Study Counsel*, studied periods of epistemological thought. He noted changes that seemed to occur in freshmen as they became sophomores and then juniors. He refrained from calling these periods stages, probably rightfully so. There is something that is not just in the thought but in the task demands of those situations in life that contribute to the conflicts and their partial resolution.

But out of this, the abstractions of epistemological stages grew. They have taken on a life of

their own, generating the Perry movement, many Perry measures, a few attempts to relate the Perry scheme to “standard” stages (e.g., Kitchener & Fischer, 1990; Kitchener, Lynch, Fischer, & Wood, 1993).

At one meeting of the *Society for Research in Adult Development* at the Sheraton Hotel in Cambridge, Perry came and discussed with us for about 3 hr all manner of issues, especially whether or not his top period of relativism with commitment was the end of development. He said that he thought that the relativism was like a dialectical step which would actually be resolved by a number of people. This would result in a syntheses of the relativistic poles, rather than just a commitment to one or the other. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of us figured out that putting a system into perspective, which is what happens in one form of relativism, is the metasystematic stage.

In this special issue, we bring together many of the newest Perry research results. Where do we go from here? The issues that Perry research address here are central to many enterprises from higher education to the conduct of science and the humanities. But a great deal of work needs to be done. Different epistemologies should apply to different domains of truth. For example, the content but not the sequence of stages should be different for phenomenological truth, empirical truth, and analytic truth. The stages beyond systematic need much more study with participants who could reach such stages, metasystematic and paradigmatic. Why not study the texts of epistemological books such as the authors in O’Donohue, William, and Kitchener’s book on behaviorism (O’Donohue et al., 1999)?

Much greater clarity must be achieved to what happens to reflective thinking at each developmental stage as Dawson points out. There needs to be more Rasch scaling and scoring of protocols with a much larger age and educational range.

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