A Synthesis of Holding Environment, Readiness and Action Methodology

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show that although there is tacit agreement among the integral community that the process of development from one level to another, happens in a transcend and include mode, this only focuses on what happens, not how it happens. In the research already done and in the theories already created there are aspects which point to how people develop from one level to another. This paper will outline three perspectives on developmental psychology, give an example of a theorist from each perspective and show their mechanisms of development. It will then go on to highlight action methodologies, framing environments and readiness to develop. It will conclude by uniting these three aspects together to illustrate how a person can be enabled to develop from one level to another.
As outlined in the abstract there is an understanding that we develop from one level to another in a process of transcending the level we are at and including it in our next formulation of reality. In Integral Psychology, Wilber (2000) describes the process in relation to the self in a three step outline. The self first “identifies with and consolidates” (p.35) the level it is at, then it “disidentifies with it (transcends it, de-embeds from it)” (p.35) “and then includes and integrates it from the next higher level” (p.35). While this describes what happens it does not say how or why it happens. It is the intention of this paper to illustrate three requirements for this transcend and include process to occur.

A Thesis Framing Anecdote

In In over our heads, Kegan (1994) describes a guy named Richard who is sent to a job training program. The program does not highlight where Richard is at developmentally but accepts him as he is. The program exposes him to a half finished boat and a letter from an employer offering money for the boat when it is fully made. The challenge is set to finish the boat and this feeds into Richard’s desire for personal enhancement and expression of personal competence. Support is offered in the form of competent adults who are able and willing to teach Richard how to make the boat. The program insisted on group work, and that trainees become aware of each other’s strengths and weaknesses and to consider others while doing their part of the job. This enabled Richard to move from one constitution of himself to another. How he is when he comes into the program becomes how he was. At the end of the program he has a new way of being. (pp. 43, 46-47).

In this example three things are evident. The first is what Kegan calls a holding environment. As Kegan (1994) describes “a holding environment is a tricky transitional culture, an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over. It fosters developmental transformation, or the process by which the whole (“how I am”) becomes gradually a part (“how I was”) of a new whole (“how I am now”) (p.43). It combines the methods of challenge and support. The second thing that is evident is that in this example Richard was ready. He was in what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development (Goldhaber, 2000, p.343). Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of
potential development as determined through problem solving under adult supervision or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p.86). The third thing which is evident is that he had to engage in an action methodology. By action methodology I mean he had to perform a task in a certain way, which by the very nature of the task, challenges the individual to grow in their cognitive ability and / or sense of self. So in this case Richard had to build a boat. He not only had to build a boat but he had to build it as part of a team which considered others’ strengths and weakness, and held in mind awareness of their needs. So the action methodology by its very nature forms cognition and sense of self.

This anecdote and analysis illustrate the thesis of this paper.

Framing perspectives.

To put human development in perspective there are three worldviews which can be applied, the mechanistic worldview which focuses on how we are, the organistic worldview which focuses on why we are and the contextualistic worldview which focuses on what we are (Goldhaber, 2000).

The Mechanistic Worldview.

The mechanistic worldview is usually taken to focus on the external environment as the source of behavioral change but Goldhaber (2000) sees it as more expansive in that it is the “more fundamental belief of mechanism that it is possible to tease apart the various factors that influence behavioral change and having done so, to assign an independent relative level of importance to each” (p.15). The analogy mechanist’s use is the machine. They hold that understanding “the way machines operate can shed light on our understanding of the way humans operate. To this end they see humans, like machines as having primary qualities which exist independently of one another, have a particular relationship to one another and that “a change in one component is reflected in a change in other components. They reduce everything to its parts and claim we are nothing more than the sum of our parts (p.16). Secondary qualities like “ (p.17) sensations, perceptions, feelings, hopes and dreams” do exist but they are not essential for functioning. As regards development they focus more on behavioral change seeing this as observable in primary qualities and seeing development as something which happens in the secondary qualities.
The Organistic Worldview.

The Organistic worldview employs the metaphor of the living organism as opposed to the machine to illustrate human development. The elements create a process which are “integrated to form a synergistic whole” (Goldhaber 2000, p.32) which is “more than the sum of its parts” (Goldhaber 2000, p.32). Organicists see development as integrative change which is internally driven rather than externally caused. Development is the “continuing integration of fragments into ever larger wholes”. This integration happens through a dialectical process. So there is the thesis and antithesis and these “integrate to form, at the next higher level, a synthesis” (Goldhaber 2000, p.34).

The Contextualistic Worldview

The contextual worldview employs the historical act as the root metaphor for human development. Goldhaber (2000, p.47) refers to Pepper’s description. He [Pepper] (1961) “describes these acts as intrinsically complex, composed of inter-connecting activities with continuously changing patterns. He likens these acts to the plot of a novel; he sees them as “literally the incidents of life”” (p.233). The contextual worldview emphasizes dispersiveness. This means that they do not seek universals but look to the “interdependency of the individual within the sociocultural context” (Goldhaber 2000 p.47) probing what meaning a person is applying to their “actions and surrounding events” (Goldhaber 2000, p.48). This means that for contextualists there are no permanent structures to discover for a structure is specific to its time and place and the interest is in what meaning a person gives to these events they experience.

In my understanding of these worldviews, the mechanistic worldview seems to be a rational empirical perspective, the contextual worldview a relative perspective and the organistic worldview and integral perspective.

Mechanisms of Development

An example of a theorists from each perspective would be Bandura and Social cognitive / learning theory form the mechanistic worldview, Piaget and his cognitive stage theory in the organistic worldview and Vygotsky and the socio-cultural approach in the contextualist worldview. All of these theorists have examples of mechanisms of development.
The Mechanistic Worldview.

In the mechanistic worldview Social Learning theory focuses on “processes of change” (Miller, P.H., 2002, p.196). For Bandura development occurs by “three main factors: physical maturation, experience with the social world and cognitive development” (Miller, 2002, p. 196). Social learning theorists do not see physical maturation as being very relevant except that “children may not have the physical maturity to reproduce certain motor patterns” (Miller, 2000, p.196). As regards experience with the social world, this factor is where children learn behaviors, the appropriate environment to express these behaviors and these behaviors are reinforced by others in their social world. So development is seen as an ever increasing repertoire of behaviors. As regards cognitive development “children’s conceptions of the world and of themselves are formed by direct experience of the effects produced by their actions and vicarious experience of the effects produced by other’s actions” (Miller, 2002, p.197).

The Organistic Worldview.

As regards the organistic world-view Piaget is an example of someone who is focused on structural change. He was also interested in dialectical processes (Zeitler D., personal communication) however I am going to focus on the structural here. Piaget describes two “functional invariants” (Miller, 2002, p.62) which are consistent over time. Miller (2002) states that “functional invariants are intellectual functions that operate throughout development. The two basic functional invariants are organization and adaptation” (p.62). Cognitive Organization “is the tendency for thought to consist of systems whose parts are integrated to form a whole”. (Miller, 2002, p.63) These systems are inter-relative. Development consists then of “changes in the nature of cognitive organization as the structures of thought change from stage to stage” (Miller, 2002, p.63). Cognitive adaptation “pertains to interaction between the organism and the environment” (Miller 2002, p.63). We as far as Piaget is concerned are adaptive creatures. Adaptation happens through assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is incorporating reality into our current model of interpretation. Accommodation is more about upward adjustment in response to demands beyond our current capacity. Cognitive equilibrium is a third functional invariant. It is where “every organism strives toward equilibrium with the environment and equilibrium with self”
Equilibrium is the balance between assimilation and accommodation. If there are changes to the self or the environment produces disequilibrium, the self-regulating organism seeks to correct.

*The Contextualist Worldview.*

In the contextualist worldview Vygotsky focuses on the dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Miller, 2002, p.401). This proceeds through “verbal and nonverbal interaction” with those more advanced using “play….technological and psychological tools” (Miller, 2002,p.402). The child internalizes or appropriates processes from the “adult or more advanced peer” (Miller, 2002, p. 402) and through this the intermental becomes intramental. Through the collaboration with and adult, “language (…) and observation … contribute to the process of change” (Miller, 2002, p.402).

**Action Methodologies**

Action methodologies are actions a person does which enable them to grow. In short they are transformative actions. As Piaget claims actions produce logic. So in other words social tasks can produce cognitive development.

Bandura as noted earlier focuses on how children observe others as they socially interact and through this process learn behaviors. As regards cognitive development as children gets older they have the “ability to translate observations into symbols and recombine these symbols” (Miller, 2002, p.197).

Piaget studied how boys form social rules. He observed boys playing marbles without interference from adults and saw that they spontaneously co-construct rules (Zeitler D., Personal communication). As noted earlier, as regards cognition, it expands it capacity when confronted with knowledge that is not able to assimilate into its current conception of the world.

As regards Vygotsky there is the need for social interaction with an adult such as a parent or teacher and this combines with the cognitive in that the child internalizes what it learns through the interaction.

Here I will give an example of stages of action methodologies in Piaget and Bandura.
Piaget

*Associativity and reversibility.* Piaget has six stages in his Sensorimotor level of development and at the last stage of this level he describes the principle of associativity, where “one can reach a point through different reconnected paths” (Crain, 2005, p.121) The example he gives is of his daughter “Jacqueline could recover a ball that rolled under the sofa by making a detour around the sofa” (Crain, 2005, p.121). She could do this because she has developed the ability to visually internalize the balls trajectory (Crain, 2005). This was aided and abetted by her stage five ability to follow “a series of displacements, so long as they can see us making them” (Crain 2005, p.121). How this is an action methodology is that is performing the task of finding the ball gradually the child learns the principle of associativity. This principle of associativity is coupled with the principle of reversibility for Jacqueline could bring the ball back, not just follow where it went (Crain, 2005).

*Deferred imitation, preconcepts and transductive reasoning.* As children develop through stage six of Piaget’s Sensorimotor and on to preoperational thinking they develop the ability to practice “deferred imitation” (Crain, 2005, p.122). The example Crain uses is of Piaget’s child “Lucienne opening her mouth before opening the matchbox” (Crain, 2005, p.122), thus using “her mouth to represent an action she had not yet performed” (Crain, 2005, p.122). As language develops the child does not have the capacity for “coherent logic” (Crain, 2005, p.122) so she / he uses “preconcepts” (Crain, 2005, p.122) to build her / his cognitive framework. Here we see another action methodology employed in development. The example Crain gives is Piaget’s child Jacqueline when only three years old said that her daddy “has lots of Luciennes and lots of Jacquelines” (Crain 2005, p.122). Here we see that she had no “concept of a general class” (Crain 2005, p122). This means that children at this early preoperational level have or are developing transductive reasoning, as in they shift from “the particular to the particular” (Crain 2005, p. 122).

*Identity, compensation and inversion.* Piaget used the demonstration of conservation of liquids to illustrate the emergence of the next level, that of concrete operational thinking. Briefly the experiment he uses is: A child is shown two identical glasses of liquid and asked if they hold the same amount. Then one glass is poured into a lower and wider container and the child is then asked do they hold the same amount. At the preoperational level they cannot
discern that they are the same amount. However as they leave the preoperational level they use the action methodologies of identity, compensation and inversion to create the ability to discern the equality of amounts. The identity argument asserts that “you haven’t added or taken any away, so they’re still the same” (Crain, 2005, p.123). The compensation argument they assert is “This glass is taller here, but the other one is wider here, so they’re still the same” (Crain, 2005, p.123). And the last method is the argument for inversion which asserts, “They are still the same because you can pour this one back to what it was before” (Crain, 2005, p.123).

Bandura

**Imitate behavior:** Young children “rely heavily on visual images to represent past observations” (Miller, 2002, p.197) and “often do not make a connection between the model’s behavior and the consequences of that behavior later on” (Miller, 2002, p. 197). An example would be of a teacher showing the children an image or modeling and they being not able to answer questions without referring to the image or seeing a repeat of the behavior. It is not yet in their heads.

**Translate observations into symbols, recombine and rehearse.** As children grow they develop the ability to use symbols. As Miller says (2002) “symbols can be rehearsed and thereby stored in memory more efficiently than visual images” (p.198). This means children can “formulate hypotheses about physical or social events and test them” (Miller, 2002, p.198).

**Symbolic functioning.** Again as children progress in their ability to use symbols they are able to follow modeled behavior from “reading a description of it or listening to instruction rather than by having to see the behavior and trying to reproduce it” (Miller, 2002, p.198).

So here we see various action methodologies which combine the social and the cognitive to develop higher and higher capacities in children. It is my contention that there are different action methodologies that can be performed at different levels. Knowing this we can set social tasks which enable people to develop these cognitive abilities. This continues into adulthood. A clear example of an action methodology employed by the integral community for the purpose of development is Integral life practice (Wilber, K. Patten, T.,

Framing Environments

According to Miller (2002), “Klaus Riegal (1976) identified four sources of developmental change in a dialectical process: (1) inner biological, (2) individual psychological, (3) cultural sociological (4) outer physical (p.401). These dimensions are rather similar to the four quadrants that tetra emerge in the AQAL model of Ken Wilber’s integral theory (see Sex, ecology and spirituality, 2000). What Riegal shows is that conflict can emerge in any of the dimensions, e.g. “parent-child conflict in the individual-psychological dimension or conflict between racial groups in the cultural-sociological dimension” (Miller, 2002, p.401). All dimensions interact with one another to form an over arching framing environment, e.g. “a serious illness (inner biological change) may thwart one’s career and cause family tensions (individual – psychological dimension) (Miller 2002, p.401). This shows that the framing environment can either aid or disable development. Anything can happen in any dimension which can affect the growth and development of the individual.

Readiness: Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky saw the zone of proximal development as linking development and learning. “For Vygotsky development (a natural process) always lags behind learning (a culturally mediated process)” (Goldhaber, 2000, p.343). Goldhaber (2000, p.343) states how “Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult supervision or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). A child needs a scaffold in order to develop from one level to another. As Goldhaber (2000) says about readiness, “ for a scaffold to be a scaffold, the child must first be at a point in development at which she is able to benefit from the instruction or prop and second, a sense of intersubjectivity must be established between child and adult” (p.343). This clearly shows that for an individual to develop that it needs to learn at a level it is ready for with the support of someone who is able to “intermentally” engage with them so that they can “internalize the culturally mediated sign” (Goldhaber. 2000, p. 343).
Discussion and Conclusion

If we bring all three aspects together into a unified synthesis, we see that what is necessary for development is at least three things: A framing environment of challenge and support, which enables one to perform a task (which I am calling action methodologies) at one’s level of readiness which produces transformation in one’s cognitive ability or sense of self or a skill of some sort. I have shown the framing environment of the contextualist worldview, an action methodology from both the organistic and mechanistic worldview, and the readiness necessary for development, which is also a contribution form the contextualist worldview. Taking these three together we can see that given a suitable environment, when one is ready if one performs a social task then one will develop in a transformational way. The value of knowing this is that we can design environments, test for readiness and either provide or specify tasks which will produce the result of transformation from one level to another.

APA References

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