

CDF: The end of developmental absolutism and reductionism?

By Otto Laske

Initial Commentary

Although I have no desire whatsoever to become a critic of Wilber's work, but am rather interested in the "Wilber phenomenon" – the fervent attachment many have developed to his writing -- the critical commentary I have been received regarding this article has been most helpful to me. What in this paper is said about "Wilber" regards, to my best understanding, not so much his writing, but rather the way Wilber's work has been, and is, being received and used by his followers.

It is perhaps time "to defend Wilber against his lovers", as Adorno once said about J. S. Bach. That is to say, it is time for everybody using Wilber's thoughts to stand away from the "Wilber" s(he) has concocted based on their own developmental level (especially of dialectical thinking), and ask with sincerity: "is this really the best I can do using Wilber's writings?" I think this could lead to a new clarity about what is really owed to Wilber's explanation of everything.

Introduction

For nearly thirty years, social scientists have lived in an era of philosophically unwarranted absolutism and reductionism engendered by speculation about adult development. Whole nations, organizations, and individuals have been reduced to their "developmental level", and consulting procedures called "integral" or similarly have been put in place to boost this "level" (assuming that higher is better). If at least this absolutism and reductionism had been based on inter-rater reliable assessments! But no, the developmental tenets have been used very sloppily and talked about more than empirically researched. In retrospect, the fact that this absolutism and reductionism have been accepted, and are still in vogue today, is a social phenomenon in itself. How has this phenomenon arisen, how has it blossomed, and what does it say about social science of the beginning 21st century?

Even from an elementary philosophical vantage point the reduction of social reality to one of its many dimensions is suspect, or at least should be. After all, human consciousness is very broad and deep, comprising many dimensions – social-emotional, epistemic, cognitive, psychological, and by extension organizational and political as well. It is in the context of this multiplicity that the reduction and absolutism that have occurred raise a red flag regarding the realism and sophistication of social science thinking. The flag says we are living in an era of "one-dimensional man", to speak with Marcuse. It also says that what he called *the power of negative thinking*, namely of dialectical thinking, could not be further from the mind of today's developmentalists. Surely, dialectical thinking could never condone either reductionism or absolutism.

An unproven strong developmentalist claim

Historically, the reductionism and absolutism that we are witnessing all around us are rooted in the work of Graves and Beck. Although with a different focus in mind, these writers have put forward **an overly strong developmentalist claim**, put by Graves as follows (*Summary Statement, "The Emergent, Cyclical, Double-Helix Model of the Adult Human Biopsychosocial System," Boston, May 20, 1981; Wilber, 2000, 40; 227*):

When the human is centralized in one state of existence (center of gravity), he or she has a psychology which is particular to that state. His or her feelings, motivations, ethics and values, biochemistry, degree of neurological activation, learning system, belief systems, conception of

mental health, ideas as to what mental illness is and how it should be treated, conceptions of and preferences for management, education, economics, and political theory and practice are all appropriate to that state.

In short: you are your level. This is a little bit like saying “you are your Id” (Freud), or “level is destiny”. Truly longitudinal developmental thinking could never take such a misstep.

Rather, longitudinal developmental thinking would insist that to show the truth of such a claim, you would have to undertake longitudinal studies like George Vaillant has done since 1967 regarding the Harvard Grant Study, using exclusively behavioral predictors. Vaillant carried forward a prospective adult-developmental longitudinal study that was started in 1938. He accompanied a cohort of 270 Harvard men who are today in their nineties by assessing them every 7 years, following a slightly modified but nevertheless consistent methodology. The study’s variables, although shifting somewhat over the years, are mainly psychological and statistical (no longer physiological as at the beginning of the study), reaching from use of alcohol to establishing intimacy to the age at death of an individual’s maternal grandfather. **That is developmental research!**

“But it should be epistemological”

In contrast to Vaillant’s work, members of the Kohlberg School followed what H. Gardner had called “the cognitive revolution” (1980), namely the substitution of strictly behavioral research variables by epistemological ones. The Kohlberg research cohort claimed J. Piaget as its ancestor, and Erik Erikson as the instigator of a new kind of developmental research focused on adult maturity. What matters to these researchers are *ways of knowing, not ways of behaving*. Initially, this was a progressive step since it was based on actual research, started by Jane Loevinger. Students of Kohlberg at Harvard followed suit, doing actual empirical research on ethics, meaning making, and *thinking*.

However, in the 1980’s, largely on account of Wilber’s speculative writings, a DISCONNECT occurred that, like the naked emperor, has not been noticed to this day. The disconnection is one between speculating about adult development and actually assessing it empirically.

“Development” became a buzzword, a token of progressive thinking, a fetish. Epistemological it was, but without an appropriately rich empirical basis!

What’s Different in CDF

Created between 1998 and 2000, the research and teaching framework called *Constructive Developmental Framework* is based on the key maturity models of the 1980s and 1990s, but goes beyond them in seeing 3 of the 7 models making up the Wilber Canon as intrinsically related (Cook-Greuter, Kegan, Basseches, Torbert, Commons, Fischer, Jaques). As the originator of CDF, and a student of both Kegan and Basseches as well as Jaques, what I noticed was:

- In the Wilber Canon, the 7 developmental models are being kept separate and are (nevertheless) seen as making up a unity legitimizing developmental speculation.
- Three of the seven models are social-emotional in the sense of Kegan’s work, and four are cognitive in the sense of Basseches, Commons, Fischer, and Jaques, respectively.
- The cognitive models are all formal logical models, thus bypass dialectical thinking. (This also holds for King and Kitchener’s studies of reflective judgment).

- In the integral community, the link between the social-emotional and cognitive dimensions is not a topic of study, nor are psychological (behavioral) variables seen as potentially causing developmental regression and/or delay.
- A behavioral base in the form of a psychological dimension, in the sense of Freud, Vaillant or others is missing in integral discussions.
- Although all 7 models named above were initially based on empirical assessment, once put into an integral context, assessments were largely abandoned and replaced by speculation about society and ways of knowing in other, mostly Asian, cultures.
- Overall, developmental thinking moved to a “meta-level”. At this juncture the term “epistemological” became an excuse for the wildest speculations.
- When keeping the key developmental models separate and unconnected to psychological models, the fact that they are not rooted in psychological reality goes unnoticed.
- Therefore a hierarchy between the social-emotional, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of human consciousness as descriptors of uniquely individual capabilities could not be established.

This is the ideological landscape in which CDF was born.

CDF addresses all of the issues named above. It is the first “post Wilber” step into the future of developmental research. The nakedness of the developmental emperor had finally, after more than 25 years, been noticed.

Some CDF Highlights

1. CDF selects from the 7 key models named above 2 outwardly unrelated models, those by Kegan and Basseches, and adds a psychological dimension, fashioned after Henry Murray’s psychodynamic personality theory.
2. The purpose of combining the three models is to put the three chosen models into relationship with each other, both for purposes of developmental research and for giving practical feedback to individuals in search of themselves and a better quality of life.
3. Learning to practice CDF requires learning the tools offered by its three dimensions and, based on that, writing 3-4 empirical case studies on individual clients (more than most people who “like” developmental thinking care to invest).
4. For the first time in CDF, the social-emotional issue of meaning making and the cognitive issue of dialectical thinking are seen in relationship to each other, both in the sense of how are they empirically related and how one can use them practically in order to boost individuals’ developmental profile.

5. The cognitive dimension is conceived of as transcending formal logical thinking toward dialectical thinking in the tradition of Hegel, the Frankfurt School, Sartre, and Bhaskar (that is, philosophy, not empirical research). However, at the same time, the cognitive dimension is addressed in terms of empirical research asking, with Basseches, “in empirical terms, how does thinking called *dialectical* actually develop in specific individuals over the life span?”
6. *Personally speaking, I had the privilege of knowing both Kegan and Basseches personally and their different ways of investigating adult development were striking to me. Coming from philosophy and psychology, it was only natural for me to ask: “what do the models of these two teachers of mine have in common?” In addition, by 1998 I had become a clinical psychologist, and had learned, and come to appreciate, empirical assessments.*

In my 1999 thesis (“Transformative effects of coaching on executives’ professional agenda”, PsyD thesis), I introduced my teachers’ models as the “professional agenda interview” (Basseches) and the “subject-object interview” (Kegan), respectively. Working with 10 executives, I made a first attempt to link the outcomes of my two developmental interviews in giving feedback to my clients.

The first, cognitive, interview was my own creation. It was based on conceptualizing an individual’s internal work space in terms of three dimensions that I called “Task House” (Mintzberg), “Organizational House” (Bolman and Deal), and “Self House” (Haber).

The second, social-emotional, interview, neatly separated from the cognitive one, was refined in its assessment protocol beyond what Kegan taught, by introducing the RCP, or *Risk-Clarity-Potential Index* that differentiates Kegan stage descriptions. At its origin, CDF was called the **Developmental Structure/Process Tool (DSPT™)**, where the “structure” was social-emotional and the “process” was cognitive, the latter driving the former. The central idea of my thesis [rarely read!] was that the coach should be seen as the supervisor of a client system (the coachee), and that, as a professional, s(he) needed a supervisor since (s)he was essentially a psychologist in training. The task of the coach’s supervisor was to assist the coach in acquiring a “professional persona” different from his/her “own little personality”. **In this form, then, in my 1999 thesis I introduced evidence based coaching as well as coach supervision, both rarely achieved today.**

7. In writing a PsyD thesis, I thought from the start that a developmental assessment tool separate from a psychological dimension was untenable. Therefore, in 2000 I added to CDF a psychodynamic questionnaire created by a student of the Harvard personality researcher Henry Murray, called the *Need/Press Questionnaire* (www.needpress.com, soon to be available in English, Spanish, French, and German). This psychodynamic questionnaire makes a fundamental distinction between unconscious needs and semi-conscious pressures imposed by an individual’s value system (super-ego) and the social reality in which the individual is placed. Based on a selection of 18 variables long researched by Henry Murray, the questionnaire

researches an individual's *self conduct, approach to tasks, and emotional intelligence (interpersonal perspective)* in an organizational work environment, generating a written feedback report.

There is an obvious relationship between the *Three Houses* of the CDF cognitive interview and the three clusters of the Need/Press questionnaire. The cluster "self conduct" in NP is linked to the cognitive interview's Self House, while the cluster "approach to tasks" is linked to the cognitive interview's Task House. Finally, the NP cluster "emotional intelligence" is linked to the cognitive interview's Organizational House. This direct link does not exclude other links between the three NP clusters and the Houses of the cognitive interview.

In addition, the three NP clusters also entertain relationships with an individual's social-emotional profile which they differentiate. That is, one and the same NP profile seen in light of different developmental stages and cognitive profiles and their combination, is to be interpreted differently for purposes of feedback and the formulation of coaching or other consulting plans.

8. In a counter-movement to the integral culture that continued speculation on "development", through my work with CDF I came to see that the developmental and psychological dimensions were related along 2 axes, the "vertical" one (of Wilber), and the "horizontal" one of Henry Murray.
9. CDF had now become a loner in the speculative developmental culture that was spreading world-wide. People suddenly woke up to the fact that their adult development lasted to their last breath. This was reinforced by empirical studies in cognitive science, especially brain research. A taboo of thousands of years, that saw "man" as fully shaped at 25 years of age, had been broken.

However, empirical data derived from adult-developmental research was largely missing: no cognitive case studies beyond those of Basseches, Commons, and Fischer existed, especially none about the growth of dialectical thinking in adults.

Use of CDF made it clear to me that it made sense to assume there existed a hierarchy between the cognitive, social-emotional, and psychodynamic dimensions. The hierarchy had to do with the degree to which these dimensions were relevant to understanding the uniqueness of individual clients.

While the social-emotional dimension (often called "developmental" due to not separating it from the cognitive) says almost nothing about a specific individual (and thus leaves a lot to be made up by the developmental consultant), the cognitive dimension specifically addresses how the individual constructs answers to the question of "what can I do, and what are my options?"), while the psychological dimensions centrally addresses the individual's uniqueness and unique capabilities and challenges, including those that delay or make impossible either social-emotional or cognitive development, or both.

The Relationship of Vaillant's Research to CDF

True developmental research is longitudinal, more precisely *prospectively* longitudinal.

In regular intervals, it follows an individual over his or her entire lifespan, as in Vaillant's work. Such research relies on repetitive assessments every 5 or 7 years over an person's entirely lifetime. Clearly, this is an expensive and methodologically difficult undertaking since not only do the subjects of a study die off, but those undertaking the research do also, and if replaced, still have to be funded in their work and cope with unforeseen vicissitudes. In addition, different methodological points of emphasis of such a study will arise over time (research fashions), as shown by the Grant Study. It is a battle with death for the sake of deepening insight into what is a "human life", and how it is composed.

While CDF is based on, and is a framework for, developmental research in a much broader sense than is encouraged by the 7 key maturity models taken separately of the Wilber Canon, to this day CDF has never been used beyond IDM "snapshot" case studies at a particular point in a client's life. So far, it has not been used in a truly longitudinal way. A longitudinal study would have to use all three dimensions of CDF in assessments administered every 5 or 7 years, to be able to collect valid data about an individual's life course in terms of the cognitive, social-emotional, and psychodynamic aspects of adult life.

It is an interesting proposition to ask to what extent the psychological, social-emotional and cognitive scores obtained through CDF are *predictor variables* of adult developmental outcomes such as "success in life", "longevity", "reaching Erikson's stage of generativity", and others. In particular, what would be interesting to see is how psychodynamic variables taken from the Need/Press Questionnaire (e.g., Energy Sink) compare, in terms of predictive relevance (correlational depth), to strictly developmental variables. If such studies were done, it might become easier to develop theories about how psychodynamic ("clinical") and social-emotional and cognitive predictors actually relate to each other in individuals' lives.

For me, of particular interest in this regard is the issue of *longevity*. This issue raises questions like the following:

- Do individuals who develop to a high social-emotional level have an edge in longevity over those remaining below, or at, Kegan level 4?
- Do periods of long delay in proceeding from Kegan stage 3 to 4 create a general developmental *décalage*?
- Are people who have developed a high degree of dialectical thinking, measured in terms of the CDF *Fluidity Index* and/or *Systems Thinking Index*, biologically successful in living beyond 80 years of age? If so, in what proportion for those in phases 2 and 3 of dialectical thinking development (i.e., fluidity index < 30 and <50)?
- Is the CDF *Fluidity Index* (that indicates strength of use of dialectical thought forms) a better longevity predictor than the *Systems Thinking Index* (that indicates the ability to coordinate thought forms of different classes, thus the ability to construct the world in a more realistic fashion), or can neither of them serve as predictors of longevity?
- Does an individual whose cognitive profile surpasses his/her social-emotional profile (in terms of an hypothesis of how these two profiles are optimally matched) fare

better in terms of longevity than in the reverse case? (In other words: is the capability for intimacy more highly relevant to successful late-life outcomes than the ability of dialectical thinking?)

- Do extreme NP needs in self conduct, approach to tasks, and emotional intelligence hinder or delay social-emotional development more than lack of cognitive development toward dialectical thinking between ages 25 and 50?
- What extreme constellation of needs across the three NP clusters accounts for the greatest *discrepancy* between an individual's social-emotional and cognitive profiles (that is, not of each profile by itself but the two profiles in their relationship)?
- Do stressors like the NP *energy sink* and *frustration index*, combined in the NP *well-being index*, have a negative impact on life expectancy, and if so, how and to what extent?
- What is the influence of a low NP attunement and high distortion index on quality of life after 75?
- What are the NP psychodynamic roots of alcoholism, both in terms of Need and Press, as a major factor in reduced longevity?
- And others.

For studies on the topics suggested above researchers would need to formulate a set of “late life success outcomes”, on one hand (the outcome variables), and a set of CDF predictor variables assessed in a specific cohort's life every 3-5, or perhaps 7, years. In this way, one could find out, not only what are the foremost CDF predictors of longevity, but also what is the relationship between developmental and behavioral CDF predictors *among each other* in the context of longevity. Once such a study is under way, other studies focused on adult developmental outcomes other than longevity could be undertaken.

Research like this would surely show the absurdity of, and perhaps even lay to rest, the developmental absolutism and reductionism that has been in vogue during the last 30 years.

Addendum regarding Th.W. Adorno's “Gesellschaftliche Vermittlung” (Mediation through Society)

Another application of CDF assessments comes to mind which, while not directly longitudinal, could certainly benefit from repeated, “prospective”, use of the Constructive Developmental Framework. I have in mind the notion of the dialectical thinker T.W. Adorno of the Frankfurt School (my early teacher) that what is usually seen as idiosyncratic in an individual is “mediated” by the state of society of which the individual is a member.

In the context of CDF this amounts to saying that the social-emotional and cognitive profile of an individual, whether seen as a snapshot or longitudinally, shows, as the same time, the imprint of “society” on the individual. The dialectic of social mediation is thus twofold:

1. On the one hand, even idiosyncratic traits of an individual reflect the social and sociological surround of the person.
2. On the other hand, the individual actively co-constructs, continuously, the essence of the society in which s(he) is living.

This has two consequences for work with CDF: first, CDF scores are not really just scores of an individual’s mental growth and/or health but reflect social pressures, as for instance documented by the “actual press” of Need/Press outcomes. Second, it is through the individual’s construction of “actual” and “ideal” press that the psychological impact of the individual on society at large becomes to be known. The second consequence also holds for the cognitive and social-emotional findings about the individual. In short, in whatever way we look at CDF scores, in terms of coaching or consulting, these scores always carry traces of societal impact on the individual who molds society along with those with whom s(he) “lives”.

As a consequence, we can say that “mediation through society” in the sense of Adorno’s theory of society is concretely speaking mediation through cognitive, social-emotional, and psychological processes, both of mental growth and mental health. Whether this mediation is foremost a matter of social-emotional or cognitive processes is an empirical longitudinal question.

It could well be that the relevance of social-emotional maturity is greater in one phase of an individual’s life than in another, thus may override the relevance of the cognitive profile for that life phase. And the opposite may hold in another life phase, presumably for entire cohorts of individuals (not just a specific individual). So perhaps what we mean when we say that Need/Press findings do not change dramatically over an individual’s life span **we mean that behavioral predictors are more steady in their impact on the individual than are developmental predictors** – such as RCP and Systems Thinking Index, the latter having a selective influence in one life phase more than another.

To give a behavioral example provided by G. Vaillant (2012, p. 132 f.). From the prospective Grant Study findings it seems to emerge that while the influence of close relationships of an individual with his mother is paramount in early and middle adulthood, but not in late adulthood, where the presence or absence of a close relationship with the father (who is by now dead) overrides the mother’s influence. What behavioral findings like this suggest in terms of CDF developmental profiles is entirely unknown at this time. In other words, it is a fruitful research question.

Looking at CDF scores as Tracing Societal Impact

We already know that Need/Press findings about the way in which an individual actually experiences his/her social environment – in the form of the microcosm of a particular organization – when assembled for an entire cohort is not just a statement about “corporate climate” as constructed by the cohort, but equally documents how the social surround shapes individuals’ relationship to themselves in terms of the values they follow and goals they set for

themselves (“ideal press”), or at least documents the “frustration” introduced by living in a particular social surround where one’s own value system potentially clashes with the system of values embodied by a particular social environment.

We also know that social-emotional scores are foremost of *sociological* (not psychological) relevance since they do nothing but determine within what “epistemological class” of meaning making (or “stage”) an individual finds him- or herself (saying nothing about the uniqueness of the individual). **What at this time we are most ignorant about is the relevance of developing dialectical thinking for the adaptation of an individual to life in a particular society at a specific time, not only for the individual’s work life but his/her private life as well.**

Questions like the above are all prospective longitudinal questions an answer to which would require different cohorts to be followed with the aid of CDF over at least part of their members’ life span. Certainly, if we can assess behavioral issues longitudinally, as Vaillant’s and other researchers’ work shows us, we should begin thinking about new possible insights, based on CDF, into HOW SOCIETY IS CONSTRUCTED THROUGH INDIVIDUALS’ CONSCIOUSNESS AND HOW “SOCIETY” CONSTRUCTS ITS INDIVIDUALS THROUGH PROCESSES NOT ONLY OF MENTAL HEALTH BUT OF MENTAL GROWTH AS WELL.

To the extent that this can be done, Adorno’s statement about “mediation through society” can finally be demystified and concretized at the same time.

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