

What Everybody is Losing Out On by Bypassing 40 Years of Research on Adult Development

Today, we have before us a curious fact: that despite 40 years of research in adult development (starting with J. Loevinger in 1975), the tools for assessing it are unknown (and if known about are considered “too technical” to take note of), and developmental assessment statistics continue to be disregarded.

A few remarks on this self-defeating attitude follow here.

1. One would suspect, first, that there is more than pure ignorance at play here, as in all cases where one’s self interest – or *amour propre* – is central. This is of course fully predictable. Adult development is all about loss of ego-centrism (Piaget), and such loss is indeed needed to become interested in adult development.
2. Second, there is, of course, a strong cultural barrier to climb over, to be able to take the stages and phases of one’s own adult development seriously. For all its “spiritual” tendencies, our present culture eschews empirical insights into oneself and feels better off circumventing it by lofty ideas of a spiritual beyond to be achieved. This stance hides, of course, that one can only be as spiritual as one is developed (Wilber).
3. Third, those who actually admit that there is adult development, and even write books about and teach it, have strangely shown themselves to be very squeamish when it comes to admitting that cognitive development -- the development of complex thinking -- is an integral part of what they continue to call “development”, which is restricted to a mere slice of it, called “meaning making”. In fact, leaving cognition proper out of development is a clever escape from overcoming ego-centrism.
4. One of the greatest philosophers of our time, Roy Bhaskar, would of course have a lot more to say about the neglect of complex thinking called by him “dialectical thinking”. He would see the denial of adult development as one of the many consequences of “master-slave relationships” that continue to define our society, accompanied by all the fallacies of thinking he was so superbly able to point out (Bhaskar, 1993).

When we look more deeply into what is a great burden for many people, young and old, I find that being unaware of the organic wholeness of one's Frame of Reference (FoR) – the way one presently constructs the real world – in determining one's behavior, leads to great unnecessary suffering. Neglecting cognitive development in the sense of Bhaskar is, in my view, adding immeasurably to the burden everyone of us carries.

Imagine you want to make a trip like your life's journey, and as an adult refuse to use a sufficient map! (It's not a GPS map, for sure). As a consequence of such refusal even in so-called helpers, much of present coaching, therapy, and consulting is a kind of "the blind leading the blind", in the sense that neither the helpers nor the helpees know the whole truth about why they continue to suffer in life and/or work. Nor do they realize that "helping others" is the most difficult task of all given that everybody can only help him- or herself.

There is an important corollary to this neglect of existing empirical information about individuals' true resilience and potential, and that is that all suffering seems to be understood in our culture in purely positive, not also in "negative", dialectical, terms.

What do I mean by that?

Whether self-inflicted (as it mostly is) or not, suffering signifies that one is presently in a "zone of proximal development" (to speak with Vygotsky) in which one needs variable degrees of help, including of course, cases where one is beyond help. Now, if one had a more ample notion of one's own present developmental profile *in terms of what is absent from it*, one would of course know a lot more of what kind of help one needs than without knowing about one's own present Frame of Reference. One would also know that absencing this absence (this ill or constraint) is what one should really be concerned about.

Here again, what comes up short is insight into cognitive development as having to do with the structure, not the content, of thinking (Piaget). This "structure of thinking" has remained to most *a total enigma* (despite parallel thinking, theory U, systems theory, etc), while, in fact, every sentence somebody speaks clearly shows

forth this structure of thinking that prevails, -- at least to the developmentally schooled ear.

Whole religions and philosophies have been created to relieve suffering. The fact that today's empirical social science can equally do so, outside of drugs and medicine and sociological analysis, does not seem to have occurred to many.

For somebody who has dedicated his life to relieving suffering by conveying insight into one's own developmental profile and its systemic modifications over the life span, this is a sad truth.