# CHAPTER 14:

# USING THE SUBJECT-OBJECT INTERVIEW TO PROMOTE AND ASSESS SELF-AUTHORSHIP.

**Jennifer Garvey Berger, Ed D[1]**

**Senior Researcher, New Zealand Council for Educational Research**

**Associate Professor, George Mason University**

**Partner, Kenning Associates**

*This chapter explores the intricacies of the Subject-Object Interview, the measure of Robert Kegan's theory of adult development and thus one of the primary means of assessing self-authorship. The author focuses on using the interview as an intervention to assist adults in moving toward self-authorship and the dilemmas involved in doing so.*

## Introduction

*Bryce[2] was a musician and high school science and music teacher when he joined a study I was conducting about his teacher preparation program. As part of the study, he sat down with me for a Subject-Object Interview (SOI), a semi-clinical interview designed to measure*

---

[1] My thanks to those readers who read earlier drafts and made this a better piece of work. My readers span three continents (and an island) and five time zones, and all have my gratitude: The editors of this volume, Paul Atkins, Robyn Baker, Michael Berger, Lisa Boes, John Derry, Catherine Fitzgerald, Keith Johnston, Alan Snow, and quite possibly others whose contribution was made in the thick of a deadline and thus not acknowledged as it should have been. It takes more than one head to do this work, and I am honored to have all of your heads keeping company with mine!

[2] All names and some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the research participants who have given generously of their time and thinking.

*his form of mind using the developmental theory of Robert Kegan. I asked Bryce questions that were designed to reach for the edges of his understanding—so that I could have a sense of what he was taking responsibility for, what he saw as inside his own control (e.g. what things he self-authored), and what things he directed more externally. He greatly enjoyed having his thinking pushed and was alert to the new discoveries he was finding as he heard himself struggle with some of the questions. He talked about how the process of the interview was pushing him to see that he was making his decisions based on implicit values and principles that he used constantly but examined rarely. At the end of the interview, he thanked me for the work I had done to help him make these new discoveries, and said he'd have a lot to think about in the future.*

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\**

*Jan was a senior executive in a large organization, and for all of her seniority, she struggled with her rage over the actions of some of her employees. She found that some of them did not display the devotion to the organization that she did, and that they flaunted this behavior by doing things like calling their doctors or their nannies during business hours, which Jan found unthinkable. She knew she was in the right on this issue because she had learned very important lessons about loyalty from her first and most important mentor. She had an experienced and well-respected coach who tried without success to help Jan shake this pattern. Jan's coach asked me to administer and report back about a new and unusual use of a developmental measure which would give his client feedback on where she was in her developmental journey and what some potential growth strategies might be. I interviewed Jan and reported that it seemed to me from the interview that she was embedded in a concept of loyalty which was externally derived from a source more than 30 years old. We discussed the possibility of her authoring a new definition of loyalty which was perhaps less bound to*

*particular behaviors, and talked about the multi-faceted path towards self-authorship. While Jan had been coached for three years and had been in therapy for more than ten, having a developmental map laid out before her changed the way she understood herself and her problem.*

*Jan, her coach, and I began to imagine possibilities for new definitions she might create of loyalty (and other ideals, principles, and values she found she had imported from others rather than authoring for herself). She found that with some support from her coach, she could begin to write—and edit—her own definition of loyalty to be more inclusive and less attached to the outcomes her mentor had valued decades before. Her coach reported two months later that he had never imagined she could change so quickly; somehow, offering her the idea (and the permission) that she could author her own values, plus some support around creating the values she desired, transformed her relationship to herself and the way she made sense of those who worked with her.*

In this chapter, I'll discuss the Subject-Object Interview (SOI, Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988), the measure of self-complexity in Robert Kegan's (1982; 1994) theory of adult development. I have been using and teaching about the SOI for more than a dozen years, and my experience with it has not only shaped the way I see development and research, but also the way I understand other people and myself. I'll explain how it is administered, for what purposes it is used, and what I have learned from my experience with the measure. As we saw with Bryce and Jan, above, the kind of questions the SOI asks are not only useful in getting the interviewer some data, but are often experienced as helpful by the interviewees themselves as they face parts of their sensemaking that they do not generally face and they discover disconnections or discontinuities that they normally do not see.

Finally, I'll discuss the implications of what I have learned from this work for supporting self-authorship in general.

**Robert Kegan's Theory of Adult Development**

The adult developmental theory on which I most rely is Robert Kegan's (1982; 1994) theory of adult development, although my theoretical perspective is informed by other adult developmentalists (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1992; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Fischer, Yan, & Stewart, 2002; King & Kitchener, 2004; Torbert et al., 2004). Kegan's theory, like those of many of the other adult developmentalists I name, focuses on perspective-taking and a person's capacity for making sense of complexity, ambiguity, and paradox, and thus offers a helpful framework for understanding work in the complex worlds many adults inhabit. Theories like Kegan's show that coping well with the demands of modern life is not just related to any particular set of skills; it is also related to the way individuals make meaning about the world. These ways of making meaning of the world aren't inborn, but are developed over time as we increase our capacity to take perspectives, view authority in new ways, and see shades of grey where we once saw only black and white.

I make the most use of Kegan's theory because it offers both descriptions of the different forms of mind and also the process of movement between them. I also value the measure associated with Kegan's theory (the SOI), because it is more than simply a valid and reliable developmental measure; the process of the SOI tends to be enjoyable for the participant and also can, in itself, lead to some important insights as it did for Bryce and Jan above. The SOI distinguishes the five central "forms of mind"—qualitatively different ways of making meaning—as well as four substages between each form. Research suggests that four of these five major forms of mind are possible in adulthood. Adapting from Kegan (1994), I call these

four the self-sovereign mind, the socialized mind, the self-authored mind, and the self-transforming mind.

Those adults who currently see the world through a self-sovereign form of mind are focused primarily on their own perspectives and needs, because they cannot yet take the perspectives of others simultaneously with their own. They cannot get distance from their own thinking or psychology enough to notice patterns in themselves, so they are not able to generate psychological abstractions about themselves or others (when asked to describe who they are, for example, they might give a physical description or talk about their title at work). They are not motivated by abstract causes like loyalty or team spirit because they do not yet have a belief that the good of others is more important than their own success.[3]

Those who currently see the world with a socialized form of mind are able to distance themselves enough from their own perspectives on the world to fully internalize the perspectives of others and thereby value relationships for more than just their own self-interest. However they may rely strongly on the external perspectives and theories they have come to trust such that it is hard or impossible for them to generate answers and ideas for themselves without relying on others.

Those with a self-authored form of mind are able to recognize, understand, generate and evaluate their own standards and values for behavior sufficiently to be differentiated and integrated with respect to those around them. They have an internal set of rules and regulations—a self-governing system—which they use to make their decisions or mediate conflicts.

---

[3] You can imagine a ten-year old on a soccer field who wants her team to win and thus tries to control the ball and get as many goals as she can, not understanding the system of the team enough to see that because she does not pass to her teammates, the team as a whole is not able to score as many goals as it could if she were trying for fewer goals on her own. This view continues to be held by adults in organizations as well who can miss that their attempt at success can actually limit the success of the larger group.

Finally, those with a self-transforming form of mind—very rarely seen— are able to take a perspective on their self-authored system and understand that their system is—as all systems are—partial. They see the futility of attempting to perfect a self-authored system and instead begin to make sense of the ways we both construct ourselves and are constructed by our contexts and relationships. They are able to handle multiple roles and layers of complexity with relative ease.

The process of growth as defined by this theory is about moving more and more of what is unseen and unexamined in the way we understand the world—those things to which we are *subject* —to a place where they can be seen and examined—and become *objects* for our inspection, and, if we chose, for our reflective action. Our unquestioned beliefs about the world are held implicitly, and those beliefs shape our experience of the world and the possibilities we perceive. As we begin to question our beliefs, ideas, theories, etc., our inquiry reveals new possibilities and allows us to deal with greater and greater levels of complexity.

The most profound example of a move from subject to object is when gradually, over time, entire meaning-making systems move from being hidden (subject) to being seen (object). This shift means that what was once an unselfconscious lens through which the person viewed the world now becomes something that he can see and reflect upon. For example, when someone with a socialized form of mind begins to reflect on the way he holds other opinions rather than his own, he comes to see his whole meaning system and can begin to take reflective action to form his own opinions notwithstanding the opinions of others. When he takes this reflective action of forming his own opinions about things, his socialized form of mind becomes an object for his reflection, and he begins to see the world through a self-authored form of mind. Kegan's theory names four measurable sub-stages between each of the forms of mind I have described.

**The Subject-Object Interview**

The Subject-Object Interview (SOI) is a measure of complexity of mind that emerges from Kegan's theory of adult development. During the SOI, the interviewer attempts as much as possible to get inside the participant's own experience of the world, particularly her characteristic ways of understanding the world and organizing her experience. In this sense, the interview deals with the most fundamental aspects of the participant's meaning making and frequently exposes for her reflection some of the limits of her meaning making (as she is asked questions about her sensemaking which she's never before considered). The 60-90 minute interview is tape recorded and transcribed, and a trained and reliable scorer reads it, looking for those things that expose the structure of the interviewee's sensemaking (as opposed to a focus on the content of the interview). Content is *what* we think about—the substance of our thinking. Structure is *how* we think about the world—our hidden assumptions about authority, agency, what can be known. While a person at any form of mind might be thinking about a conflict with his boss, the way he makes sense of this conflict—how he sees his own role, how he sees the role of his emotions, the different perspectives he can take—emerges from his particular form of mind which someone can be trained to analyze. From this analysis, the scorer can reliably determine the form of mind demonstrated in the interview.

The protocol for the SOI requires that a highly trained interviewer probe for how a participant makes sense of what is going on for him. Starting with some key story-generators that help participants create a brainstorm of current experiences which they can choose to talk about over the course of the interview, the interview continues by following the interests and stories of the participants. The interviewer can follow where the participant wants to lead because the content is not the key focus—it is just the vehicle to get to the structure. The interviewer's job is to listen well and to stick to boundary-mapping questions: What was the most

important thing about that? What was hardest for you? What was most at risk? Attempting to score and test hypotheses while simultaneously asking good questions, the interviewer tries to bring enough richness to the questions so that the scorer will have lots to work with in the transcript. (See Table 1 for a brief overview about the interview process.)

| WHAT DO YOU DO? | WHY IS THIS A HELP? |
| --- | --- |
| *Step 1: Look inside the interviewee's story for key issues: responsibility, conflict, perspective-taking and assumptions about the world* | Each of these issues is likely to be a place where someone has the energy and interest to push her understanding to its edges. These issues are also the places where structure is most apparent. |
| *Step 2: Narrowing the choices.* | Every time you begin to ask questions to help you understand someone's form of mind, you should keep an open mind and assume that this person could be self-sovereign, self-transforming, or anywhere in between. After a few questions, though, you will likely have enough data to begin to eliminate certain forms of understanding and explore others. |
| *Step 3: Moving to the edge: most, least, best, worst* | Because the forms of mind are cumulative, each person who is self-authored also has some piece of her that is socialized and some piece that is self-sovereign. This means that unless you help her move to the *edge* of her understanding, you cannot know whether the socialized part you are seeing represents |

| | her greatest level of complexity. |
|---|---|
| *Step 4: Ask the same question in a new way to go deeper* | People tend to answer questions believing that they are being asked for more story. Generally it is the second or third of the moving-to-the-edge kinds of questions that actually moves away from story and into the meaning-making space. |

*Table 1. SOI process overview*

The point of this interview is to ask the questions whose answers point to particular forms of mind and not others, and then analyze those responses as the participants offer them. This allows the interviewer to create new hypotheses which lead to more hypothesis-testing questions in themselves.

- What does this person take responsibility for? What does she not?
- What are the central conflicts in her story?
- Whose perspective can she take? Whose perspective is she stuck inside?
- What assumptions about the world shape her view?

This level of questioning shows the interviewer the limits of the participants' understanding (because no one perspective is unlimited). In addition to showing these limitations to the interviewer, however, over the course of the SOI those limitations can also be quite apparent to the interviewee as well. Consider this participant's response to a question:

> None of these words [of mine] are really capturing it. I just need to spend one quiet
> minute. (pause) It's a sense of not having words that can adequately, can express--
> and I'm feeling it right now, that it's okay to be disoriented. It's not necessarily

comfortable but it's different from the discomfort of something wrong. It's the discomfort that says something is disoriented, therefore I lack words.

Here, as in many SOIs, the participant not only bumps up against the edges of his sensemaking, but sees that he has done that in his own experience of disorientation and not having words. (For more on this entire process, see Lahey, et al, 1988).

**Contribution to self-authorship**

In the past, SOIs were all conducted for research purposes and were not specifically intended to be helpful even though they were often experienced as helpful by the research participants. Many, like Bryce whose story begins this chapter, find the edges of their own thinking interesting and like exploring this uncharted territory (for different perspectives on this, see Berger, 2004). Following their own meaning making all the way to its edges gave participants a sense of their own limits, a sense of questions they were not asking or connections they were not making. We have long known that good questions and good listening would help someone take stock of his life in a new way (Rogers, 1951), but as I conducted more and more SOIs, I began to wonder whether helping participants understand their own complexity of mind could be useful for not just naming adult development but supporting it. I wondered whether showing people a picture of their own meaning-making system might open new doors for their development and help them get unstuck.

There are many mysterious things in the world, and once we can actually see them, we can begin to understand them and then perhaps even to change them. The X-ray of his clogged arteries was enough to make a friend quit smoking, exercise regularly, and reduce the fat in his diet, even though he had known for twenty years that he should do this. I hypothesized that perhaps a picture of a person's meaning making could be a powerful thing, and if that picture were combined with strategies she might try in order to expand the edges of her

meaning making, this picture could become a map towards a new way of seeing the world. Knowing the importance of the adult developmental journey—especially toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001)—I wondered whether people would find it easier to forge their own path if they had a kind of permission and guide from this theory. Similarly, I wondered what more I might learn about the development to self-authorship and beyond as I helped people see their own sensemaking. To explore these possibilities, I, along with a growing number of colleagues[4], have been using and researching these ideas for the past five years.

**Discoveries**

I now regularly use the SOI both as a research tool (particularly to develop my understanding about the developmental implications of some process or program) and a tool for promoting growth (particularly to develop someone else's understanding about the possibilities and implications for their own development). I have found that while those two categories blend into the overall discoveries and learning I have about development in general, in this section, I'll comment on the discoveries I've made in both these categories.

*SOI as a research tool*

The first time I sat down with a research participant to do an SOI, I worried that the person would be uncomfortable with the depth of my probing, that I would be making a potentially-anxious time (being in a research study) even more anxious. I found, though, that the SOI was able to build rapport in a way that even a regular semi-structured qualitative interview can not. Rather than going down a list of questions that I as the researcher cared about, the SOI method meant that I followed the participant down the path that the participant cared the

---

[4] This group began with Dr Paul Atkins and Dr Keith Johnston and now includes many of my partners at Kenning Associates (Carolyn Coughlin, Mark Ledden, and Daryl Ogden) as well as close colleagues like Jane Gray, all of whom have contributed to the thinking in this chapter.

most about. Instead of saying, "Come, follow me towards what I'm interested in discovering," (which is the implicit task for interviewees in most studies), I was saying, "Hey, I'll follow you carefully down any path you choose." This difference meant that we built rapport much more quickly and people became comfortable and settled into the interview space easily. An SOI begins to feel more like a conversation between the participant and himself as the probing deepens, and that experience was helpful for setting us up to explore the other content topics the research was about.[5]

Similarly, because the SOI is so much about the journey of the participant, participants tend to really enjoy the experience. I began to notice a trend at the end of interviews that the interviewees would laughingly suggest that they could come back for another interview like this shortly. In my research, I rarely have funding to give something materially back to the participants to thank them for their investment of time and thought; with an SOI, the interviewees seemed quite pleased with the return on their investment.

It isn't just participants who come to love the experience of the SOI, though. I have found that for me as an interviewer, the SOI is an exercise of suspending my judgment or my attempt to be helpful in order to fully understand meaning made by the person sitting across from me. This quest to understand fully—in the absence of wanting to change or correct in some way—not only deepens my theoretical understanding of development, but it often creates a deep kind of affection and resonance with the participant. When I teach about the SOI, I have novice-interviewers try out their interviewing skills in a kind of fishbowl interview while the rest of the room observes closely. When any one person in the group finds a way toward the structure of the interviewee's thinking, it is common for the whole

---

[5] There are researchers who try to cover content inside the SOI—by having the interview itself focus on the content of their study so that they do not have to do two different interviews. This is a legitimate idea and it also makes the SOI—never an easy proposition—exponentially harder

group to become electric as a current of deep understanding and regard spreads through the room. People report that the practice helps them develop new listening skills, greater empathy for others, and a deeper form of compassion.

Finally, I found that in a longitudinal study, people often report at the second SOI that the conversation we had at the first SOI changed the way they were thinking about things in their lives and what they noticed in the time after the interview (Berger & Hammerman, 2004).For example, one participant at the second interview mentioned that she had finally left a difficult relationship because as she talked about it with me, she discovered that it hadn't been healthy in a long time, but that she had been just averting her mind from the entire question of whether it was the right relationship for her or not. Another participant had realized that she was pursuing goals to gain status without actually thinking about whether she cared about achieving them for her own reasons. At our second interview, she had been spending lots of time in self-examination and thus had a well-considered response to what she was doing and why.

*SOI as a Development Tool*

It was obviously this combination of experiences as a researcher using the SOI that led me to think that perhaps the SOI would be not just a tool for research but a tool to help people develop. I have always understood that the SOI is not designed to be a helping interview or a therapeutic intervention. In fact, Lahey et al (1988), in the *Guide to the Administration and Scoring of the Subject-Object Interview*, remind us:

> We are not trying to <u>alter</u> anything, or facilitate a process <u>for altering</u> anything about the interviewee. We are not trying to alter thinking, feeling, or behavior; we are not trying to teach, change, help, advise, invite someone to rethink something, to learn the reason for their ineffectiveness, to settle their puzzlement, or to try on a new way to frame

something. Interviewees often <u>do</u> feel they have learned something from the process, but

this is neither our intent nor our agreement to promote. (p 305, emphasis in original)

And yet, I had learned how useful some people found the interview even when utility was

clearly not the goal. In fact, I had come to believe that perhaps it was *because* I wasn't

seeking to be helpful—but simply to understand—that people experienced the interview as so

unusual. I had also been using adult developmental theories in the background of my work in

leadership development programs and leadership coaching. I wondered what it would be like

to use the SOI—or something like it—explicitly with clients.

First, I altered the protocol in small but important ways. Rather than trying to determine the

highest sustained demonstrated score, as I needed to for research purposes, I decided that the

most helpful information for a person to know about himself would be both the *range* of

scores he demonstrated over the course of the interview, and what I saw as the *center of*

*gravity* of his sensemaking. I also changed my orientation to the structure/content distinction.

In this case, as someone trying to help find areas that might be useful developmentally, I

decided it was not enough to simply understand the structure; I needed also to understand the

way the structure was held by this person and the content areas where I could see some

developmental patterns cohering over time. While structure is still at the forefront of the

interview process, paying attention to the content as well means that I find out both about the

meaning making of the person in question and also about the topics and relationships and

stories about which the meaning was made. I renamed this interview a GrowthEdge interview

to track and highlight the differences between it and an SOI.

Then, with my colleague Paul Atkins I developed a report which sought to both introduce a

client to the theory in general and also offer a picture of my analysis of his interview. We

designed this report with both generic information about the theory and what it looks like,

and also a series of excerpts from the interview with our analysis, which helped both bring the theory into reality and also make object the different forms of mind participants were using. Then Paul and I conducted a small action research study to see, in a systematic way, how people responded to this experience (Berger & Atkins, in press). Most found the exercise either somewhat or very helpful. Some, like Jan whose story begins this chapter, found it was the missing piece to a long unsolved puzzle. I found that my initial hypothesis was right: learning about your own sensemaking is powerfully developmental.

From our research then, and my practice since, I have learned new things both about the developmental theory I am attempting to use, and also the process of development in general. I have made new discoveries about the dynamics of development and about the motivation for development. I discuss these below.

*Developmental dynamics*. Analyzing the interviews differently—looking for ranges and centers of gravity—meant that I began to see developmental patterns which were hidden to me before. Take an interview with Shirley, for example, who saw the world mostly through a self-authored form of mind. Theoretically, and when using an SOI for research purposes, I would try to decide exactly where Shirley was in her thinking. Right around the self-authored space there are three related but distinct forms of mind. The mission of a research SOI is to see which one was strongest for Shirley. If Shirley were *nearly*, but not quite, in the self-authored space, she might seem a little too purposeful about protecting her boundaries and about holding tight to who she is and how she makes sense of the world (in order to not fall back into a more socialized space she has just left where she was made up at least in part by the decisions and ideas of others). If Shirley were *fully* in the self-authored space, the boundaries between her and others would be just a part of the way the world works; they would take no energy to maintain and wouldn't be something she'd think or talk much about.

If Shirley were moving just *beyond* the self-authored space, she would be discovering that those boundaries are artificially constructed and limiting; her identity would be strong enough for her to let down some of the boundaries between herself and others, and she would begin to talk about the limits of her own way of looking at the world and the need to reincorporate other views and ideas into her own.

Using GrowthEdge Interview protocol means that instead of choosing between these choices for research purposes, I work to understand the *dynamics* of the way these spaces play against each other. I have found that these three distinct forms of mind are sometimes all present simultaneously, which can catch people in a cycle that is confusing to themselves and others. In this dynamic space around the self-authored form of mind, people can be both pushing to close down their boundaries and also to open them up. Their trailing edges towards the socialized mind can lead them towards defending their boundaries with others and appearing as closed at times to other opinions and perspectives. Their leading edges towards the self-transforming mind can lead them towards loosening their boundaries and appearing as very open. Sometimes they express these distinct ways with different sets of people in their lives (as they are defended at work and opening with friends, for example) but sometimes they express these distinct ways with the same group at different times. In either case, this can be confusing to both the person and also those around him. When I name this as a possible area of conflict for those I work with, I get smiles—sometimes even tears—of relief. Having me spell out and make logical a contradiction this person has been struggling with often opens up a pathway to a sensemaking system that feels more coherent—or at least more understandable.

*Developmental motivation and threat.* I have never been an unquestioning supporter of development, prodding us all on to develop as much and as far as we can (with prizes for

developmental achievements along the way). I am fully aware that a change in sensemaking, while a monumental achievement in some respects, comes with a fairly monumental cost. To reach toward a new way of seeing the world means first giving up your old way of seeing the world, understanding that what used to feel full and fulfilling now feels partial and lacking. This has been highlighted by my conversations with people inside these particular transitional spaces. One very articulate participant, as she considered the move beyond her current understanding (a self-authored form of mind), said:

> It's as if the world was flat and now, peering off the edge, I see that it's round, and I fear that if I step off into the round part, I'll look back and the flat part I know so well will be round too. And I'm afraid that if I turn around, I'll find that there's nothing left that I understand the way I used to know it. It just changes everything—nothing remains the same, and I'll be at the beginning of my knowing.

This reorganization of who she was and everything she knew before is a powerful and terrifying prospect. Also not to be ignored are the real threats to existing relationships when one person grows. Development is not like moving on an escalator, where we all move in the same direction and at the same rate. Development happens in fits and starts, and it happens for some people at one time and others at another time; the odds are slim that you'll move at the same rate and pace as important others in your life. This means that development can create big and terrifying changes in not only how we know ourselves but how we know others and how they come to know us.

Given these major costs of development, it is still my experience that those who are introduced to a developmental trajectory—especially once they see themselves placed into it in this way—tend to want to move forward. This is even true for those who are in a settled self-authored space. On many occasions, I have talked with a person who is making sense in

a solidly self-authored way and I have sketched out the major benefits of her self-authored form of mind for her particular leadership role. In the course of my description, I've touched on the self-transforming way of being as a way for her to see what could be next, but I've reiterated that her sensemaking is a good fit for her current position and I can't offer an argument for any advantage in her growing. Hearing about a potential growth space, however, helps her imagine ways that her sensemaking does limit her effectiveness, and most of the fully self-authored leaders to whom I've talked will say something like, *Ah, now that I know there is this next place to grow to, I want to work toward that!* In this way, I can see that even hearing about development in some ways can put your current way of making sense at risk. (Put another way, learning about development can, in itself, be developmental.)

**Supporting the development to self-authorship—and beyond**

The work I do is mainly inside organizations, and the people I work with are mostly leaders. From both my research and my practice, I have learnt that leadership roles make strong demands on peoples' sensemaking. I have found that these demands call strongly on the individuals inside those roles to be self-authored. Because so much of leadership demands self-authored capacities, those who are socialized (or, much more rarely, self-sovereign) can find real pain in the leadership space. As leaders are called on to create a vision, mediate conflicts, hold the good of both individuals and the organization in their minds simultaneously, those without self-authored capacities can feel insignificant, overwhelmed, and, as Kegan (1994) puts it, in over their heads. Leaders who have not yet consolidated their self-authored capacities can, like Jan whose story begins this paper, find that no measure of intelligence or hard work can make up for the frustrations of feeling their way of making sense of the world inadequate to the task. To make things worse, these struggling leaders tend not to have a way of making sense of their felt inadequacies, substituting psychological ideas that come more easily—if more harmfully—to mind. They may believe that they are simply

insecure, or unimaginative, or not powerful enough. Each of these enduring traits fails to suggest the possibility of moving out from this place and into another place, of growing from a space where you don't know that it's possible to author your life to a space where authoring your life is a common and obvious task. Our common images of development in children—which help us not to despair at the early days when the toddler knows what she wants but cannot express herself—teach us to be patient and thoughtful with those who are growing and know that in time, this stage will be over. Without a corresponding theory of adult development, it is harder to be patient and thoughtful with ourselves.

Similarly, it is harder for organizations to support leaders at different developmental places. Leaders with a socialized form of mind seem to be pushed—sometimes ruthlessly—to grow beyond themselves. Organizations tend to know that they want leaders who act in more self-authored ways, even if they do not have a theory that explains the suite of characteristics that they want[6]. They look for leaders who can name their own direction, separate themselves from the opinions of others, follow the nuance of the rules instead of just the letter of the law. To get these leaders, organizations will arrange training, hire coaches, and take performance review measures to push people into the self-authored space. A key problem with this is that organizations do not tend to have developmental theories to support their desire to see different behaviors. This means that the solutions they choose are fairly random—a training program here to deal with decision-making, a coach to support more executive presence—and the solutions can be as often disheartening as helpful. This is not to say that training programs or coaching in executive presence might not also support the development of the leader in question. These things might do that—or they might not. It is that without a theory

---

[6] This is not to suggest that organizations are uniform in their desires, however. Organizations and individual leaders can also want followers among their staff and middle managers, often looking to socialize staff within a coherent organizational culture. Most confusingly, often organizations want their leaders who are both self-authored in particular ways and also unquestioning followers of particular aspects of organizational culture in other ways. No wonder we're all so confused!

of development in place, the organizations often try to fix the symptoms without ever even noticing the root cause of the issue.

It is an irony of leadership that just as organizations don't seem to be able to support and nourish leaders with a socialized mind, they don't seem well placed to nourish and support leaders with a self-transforming mind, either. Instead, the roles seem to stay the same size even as the leader himself is growing. In nearly every case, I find that leaders who have begun their journey to the self-transforming mind have also begun their journey out of organizations. They become consultants, volunteer for causes about which they are passionate, try to help from the outside rather than from the inside. Because so many organizations are claiming a desire for leaders to deal more effectively with paradox, complexity, and ambiguity, it would seem that leaders with these self-transforming minds might be a prime resource for the organizations to learn how to retain. Sometimes we need leaders who can help us to resolve contradictions and at other times we need those who can help us see them and hold them. Great leaders can see these different contexts and make choices about how to act. Often, however, the clamor from commentators and around the management table is for the greater clarity, the clear direction or decisions, the simpler vision which is harder for those with a self-transforming form of mind.  One key benefit to a growing understanding of developmental theory could be to make organizations—and individuals—more supportive of leaders with both socialized and self-transforming minds.

**Challenges to the use of the SOI**

This chapter does not seek to make a claim that the SOI is the pinnacle of developmental tools or measures. Choosing this as a methodology for a research study or an intervention for your personal development is highly dependent on exactly who you are and what you want to

learn. There are several limitations to the SOI that make it one of the least straightforward of all developmental measures.

First of all, the SOI is very expensive to use. It requires a highly-trained interviewer to collect the data, a highly-trained scorer to make sense of a transcription of the interview, and, in those cases where someone is going to get feedback, a highly-trained coach and developmentalist to interpret the data. This training begins with a 3-day workshop and continues for some people six months or more. The initial weeks sometimes seem designed just let you know what you don't know about meaning making! The path towards being a reliable interviewer and scorer is fascinating but also enormously difficult and complex.

This means that interviewer-skill is a key ingredient in the quality of the data. That is true in most qualitative interviewing situations, but because the SOI does not have a real protocol so much as it has a way of thinking about the questions you're asking, it is even more true in an SOI.

Secondly, the SOI is a verbal measure that makes use of words on a page rather than either the full-spread of a conversation (with body language, voice tone, etc.). While the interviewer might have access to tone and body language, etc., the person who scores the interview (who may or may not be the interviewer, depending on the study design), will have only a transcript to read. This means that the SOI ignores a variety of important meaning cues in its reliance on the spoken word.

Finally, the SOI is a measure of one small slice of what it means to be human—and it only looks at 60 to 90 minutes of that slice. It measures the expressed form of mind of the *interview* which is often but not always generalizable to the form of mind of the *interviewee*. It matters to always have this as a context for the work you're doing. If there's anything

developmental theories help us understand, it's that meaning is made and remade, that making meaning is the prime activity of humanity. We can get closer and closer and closer to understanding one another (and ourselves) but we will never arrive (if you're not convinced of this, check out Wilson, 2002). As long as we keep in mind the notion that every theory is a flawed theory, that no theory describes the broad range of human existence, we will be fine. As soon as we forget that we are using a theory and believe that we might have some access to something like The Truth, we have lost our way.

**Conclusion**

We saw at the beginning of this chapter that Bryce and Jan were each helped in their own way as they caught a glimpse into their own sensemaking system and made decisions about what to do with that insight. For the past dozen years, as I have sat with people who have been having these insights, I have been honored to share in many of these sorts of experiences. There are two major lessons for me in this. The first is that being on the edge of our sensemaking can be transformative, and a tool like the SOI or the GrowthEdge Interview can support someone to stand at the edge of his sensemaking and look out over the uncharted terrain of the future. The second major lesson is that being present with someone at the edge of her sensemaking is nearly as powerful and helpful for the interviewer as it is for the participant. By being company for someone at the edge, I am able to both observe her process and also learn from the ways she is similar to and different from others who have been in a similar developmental place. I deepen my theoretical and practical knowledge each time I stand with someone at this edge.

The SOI is still in its early days as a developmental measure: 20 years old this year. Using SOI-like interviews as interventions is newer still. In order to deepen our understanding of development, we need to keep conducting research studies; in order to make our

understanding more complex, we need to share those studies with one another. Grasping the fullness of human sensemaking and development is a task too great for any of us alone, too complex and multifaceted for any single brain. We need our brains—and our hearts—to work together to deepen our understanding of the individual patterns of growth and how to support these patterns, because it is in this understanding that we can find new measures of respect, compassion, and even love for one another.

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1992). *Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students' Intellectual Development*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001*). Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development.* Sterling, Va, Stylus.

Baxter Magolda, M. B. & King, P. M.. (2004*). Learning partnerships: theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship.* Sterling, Va, Stylus.

Berger, J. G. (2004). Dancing on the Threshold of Meaning: Recognizing and Understanding the Growing Edge. *Journal of Transformative Education* 2: 336-351.

Berger, J.G., & Atkins, P. (forthcoming)  Mapping Complexity of Mind: Using the Subject-Object Interview in Coaching. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*.

Berger, J. G. & Hammerman, J. K  (2004) *Understanding teacher change through an adult developmental lens.*  Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association Conference, San Diego, CA, April, 2004.

Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2004). Making the case for a developmental perspective. *Industrial and Commercial Training, 36*(6/7), 275.

Fischer, K. W., Yan, Z., & Stewart, J. B. (2002). Adult cognitive development: Dynamics in the development web. In J. Valsiner & K. Connolly (Eds.), *Handbook of developmental psychology* (pp. 491-516). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kegan, R. (1982). *The Evolving Self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

King, P. M., & Kitchener, K. S. (2004). Reflective judgment: Theory and research on the development of epistemic assumptions through adulthood. *Educational Psychologist, 39*(1), 5-18.

Lahey, L., Souvaine, E., Kegan, R., Goodman, R., & Felix, S. (1988). *A guide to the subject-object interview: Its administration and interpretation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: its current practice, implications, and theory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Torbert, W., Cook-Greuter, S. R., Fisher, D., Foldy, E., Gauthier, A., Keeley, J., et al. (2004). *Action Inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Wilson, Timothy D. (2002). Strangers to ourselves: discovering the adaptive unconscious. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.