

DISEQUILIBRIUM, DEVELOPMENT, AND RESILIENCE THROUGH ADULT LIFE

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ABSTRACT

In the field of mental health, resilience is understood as a psychological characteristic intimately entwined with the experience of disequilibrium. Originally, the resilience literature focused on children. But psychological development can continue beyond childhood. Recently, psychologists have begun to examine the resilience that arises – or doesn't – through the vicissitudes of adult life as well. Psychologically, a human being can be considered a complex system of drives, conflicts, capacities, hopes, etc. The human life span can be conceptualized as repeated experiences of stability and disequilibrium for a person's psychological system. From that stability and disequilibrium come the emergence of new abilities and worldviews. One possible outcome of the experience of repeated psychological disequilibrium inherent to adult life is the development of psychological resilience. This paper examines the affective experience of psychological development through adult life, and it what it means to be actively receptive to development in a way that optimizes the growth of resilience throughout adulthood.

This article aims to make several contributions to the systems sciences. First, it brings psychology back into conversation with the systems community after an absence, in ISSS at least, of many years. Second, systems theorists have paid little attention to the affective experience of disequilibrium – a recognized systems process – in a human system like an adult person. Third, to the mental health community this paper seeks to communicate that perhaps much of the suffering and negative affect people experience through adulthood can be reframed from psychopathology to developmental transition – to disequilibrium, and the vulnerability and challenges that go with it.

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE OF HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY

People show considerable stability in how they describe themselves over time (Troll, 1982, 229). Experiencing a sense of a continuous “me” through life is a remarkable achievement, given that life can also be seen as a journey “dominated by dramatic shifts” (Erikson and Erikson, 1997, 41), a process no less than repeated births and deaths (Torbert, 1976). Each phase of development through adulthood is a temporary truce, a hard-won balance, and a “triumph over the constraints of the past” (Kegan, 1982, 90).

Transition continues past childhood; it is a lifelong affair. From a developmental perspective, human life can be understood as repeated experiences with psychological

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formation and reformation. The adult experience is filled with challenges and traumas, victories and defeats. Developmentally speaking, adulthood can be no less radical and dramatic, certainly no less significant, than childhood.

For many, the prominent feature of development is its architecture: sequences of stages punctuated with transitions between them. One can approach the study of adult development as the study of developmental stages that adults pass through. Kegan conceives of each stage as an “evolutionary truce... a temporary solution” to the tensions preceding that stage (1982, 108). He sees each stage as possessing its own unique “psycho-logic” – its own set of preferences, values, behaviours, and goals. Levinson (1978) and Erikson and Erikson (1997) see a life structure as a time when each person is faced with a particular issue or question that they must successfully address if they are to continue on to future development. Many developmental theorists have offered up models of the sequence of stages through which adults may pass. Each stage has a distinctive coherence, a unifying set of qualities “which have to do with the character of living” (Levinson, 1978, 18). In each stage some aspects of oneself are lived out; other aspects are inhibited or neglected. Wilber describes each developmental stage as “a level of self-existence... [which] is at once a psychological structure, value system, and mode of adaptation, which can express itself in numerous different ways, from worldviews to clothing styles to governmental forms” (2000, 47).

There are, however, complications. Each developmental stage contains within it limitations obstructing a person from the stage that follows. The next stage – and even where we currently are – we cannot see, according to many leading developmental theorists: “Whatever epistemology we are currently embedded in, or subject to, is invisible to us... We therefore cannot reflect on or observe (question, challenge, describe, examine, perceive, explore, recognize) our worldview, because it is our worldview. Only when we have begun to grow beyond its limitations... can we begin to see those limitations, in (as it were) an epistemological rearview mirror” (Taylor, 2006, 203). So, while every phase of an adult’s life dominates that time of life, few of us actively recognize how our current phase is governing our moment-by-moment decisions, priorities, and behaviours.

By now, it may be clear why development through adulthood is psychologically challenging: it is a matter of grappling with continual contradictions: stability and change, simultaneous achievement and limitation, the impact of history and future. Much of the adult development literature is conceptualized by such tensions/polarities. Jung used the philosophical term *enantiodromia* to describe this play of opposites in human life. In his view, the work of development is to grapple simultaneously with a task and its opposite. Examples of opposing pairs of developmental dilemmas include expansion and contraction (Troll, 1982), engagement in life and disengagement (Troll, 1982), mastery in life that is active and passive mastery (Troll, 1982), focus on our inherent strengths and focus on our underdeveloped capacities (Staude, 1981), grappling with issues of youth and age (Levinson, 1978), destruction and creation (Levinson, 1978), masculinity and femininity (Levinson, 1978) attachment and separateness (Levinson, 1978), conformity and individuality (Staude, 1981), duty to self and duty to society

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(Staudé, 1981), trust and mistrust (Erikson and Erikson, 1997), generativity and stagnation (Erikson and Erikson, 1997), increasing ego strength and increasing capacity for inner dialogue with non-ego aspects of the self (Staudé, 1981), intrapersonal focus and interpersonal focus, acting on the environment and being acted on by environmental forces (Troll, 1982).

A central feature of developmental psychology, then, is this dynamic of *enantiodromia* – the simultaneous presence of “gains and losses, the positive and the negative, [that are] always intertwined; every phase of life and every developmental change simultaneously involves benefits and costs” (Scheibe, Kunzmann, and Baltes, 2009, 172). This play of opposites is a lifelong process:

We move back and forth in our struggle with this lifelong tension... our balances are slightly *imbalanced*. In fact, it is because each of these temporary balances is slightly imbalanced that each is temporary; each self is vulnerable to being tipped over. The model suggests a way of better understanding the nature of our *vulnerability to growth* at each level. The model also recognizes the equal dignity of each yearning, and in this respect offers a corrective to all present developmental frameworks which univocally define growth in terms of differentiation, separation, increasing autonomy, and lose sight of the fact that adaptation is equally about integration, attachment, inclusion. (my emphases - (Kegan, 1982, 108-109)

Inherent in psychological development, then, is dilemma – and the desire to resolve it. Dilemmas create tension. As Freud recognized, the experience of tension is the experience of disequilibrium, which activates the drive to settle tension “as an effort to return to homeostasis or equilibrium” (Troll, 1982, 18).

THE DISEQUILIBRIUM OF DEVELOPMENT; THE AFFECT OF DISEQUILIBRIUM

The language of disequilibrium is worthy of note. At meetings of the International Society for the Systems Sciences and other systems societies, researchers regularly discuss disequilibrium. Systems in a “far-from-equilibrium state” (Prigogine and Stengers, 1996) we dispassionately note, are characterized by a turbulence that evidences a system breaking down. We examine and theorize about “dissipative structures” (ibid.) that demonstrate periods of disorder, incoherence, and seeming randomness replacing former predictability. We speculate about what patterns might self-organize from chaotic “phase space” (Gibbs, 1947). However, when the dissipative structure is a human being – when disorder, incoherence, and seeming randomness describe one’s psychological experience – what then? Such questions are made invisible by the scientific jargon we use to describe the dynamics of disequilibrium. While we social systems theorists readily discuss states of disequilibrium, we far less often consider how it feels “on the inside.”

When most of us ponder our own personal growth, we tend to conceptualize that development as additive – as the addition of ideas, abilities, potential to existing

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collection we already possess. Implicit in this conceptualization is that, in developing, we get to keep our current hard-won traits intact, or at least essentially unchanged. Developmental psychology paints quite a different picture; rather than an additive affair, human development is transformational.

There is loss amidst the gain. This we tend to omit in our thinking. True, transition from one stage to the next is a liberation “from that in which we are embedded, making what was a subject into object so that we can ‘have it’ rather than ‘be had’ by it” (Mezirow, 1997, 25). Nonetheless, it is a time of both forfeiting and acquiring, release and commitment. From this perspective, adult development is about giving up previous ideals and commitments in favour of new ones. Such a process is not a dispassionate exercise, not an emotionless affair as either systems scientists or developmental psychologists might lead us to think.

Thus, we need an “ideographic approach” (Troll, 1982) on life span research that examines the affective experience of development, particularly through the disequilibrium of transition, from the perspective of the person living it. What kinds of affect accompany developmental changes in adult life?

Life in Flux: Vulnerability and Confusion

Every hard-won period of developmental balance inspires a worldview that feels complete to the person living that worldview. We can view this feeling, perhaps, as a person’s relief at how well that person’s current stage resolved the dilemmas of the stage preceding it. However, if the person is to continue to develop, the commitment one has invested in his current worldview will eventually be shaken. Kegan has written convincingly that the developmental balance achieved at each stage is both tremendous achievement and “illusion” – illusory in that it will not provide lasting usefulness to a person who continues to grow. As a current worldview begins to lose its hold, a person begins to be able to experience and see ways in which the cherished worldview is false. Likely this dawning awareness will occur slowly: each worldview is its own self-regulating psychological system and will resist its demise and re-creation in another form. And because each worldview operates by its own logic (in Kegan’s words, “psychologic”) the changes one begins to experience when a new developmental stage is emerging feel surprising to the person experiencing that change. Something new is emerging, and the behaviours, feelings, and thoughts¹ associated with that new life stage feel incoherent (Shapiro, 2008), unpredictable and confusing.

People resist experiencing cognitive dissonance, including the confusing sense of dissonance that occurs when a person’s own behaviour becomes incongruous with his emerging values and self-image (Torbert, 1972). When there emerges a growing distance between the self one has created and the self one is, a person’s sense of

¹ Kegan describes this experience with the evocative phrase: “impermissible but undispatchable thought[s]” (1982, 189).

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themselves becomes vulnerable: “I am meeting up with experience in the world that cannot be made sense of according to my present way of organizing reality” (Kegan, 1982, 169). In the midst of a transition from one developmental stage to another, confusion will increase, as one comes to realize that who they thought they were, what they believed, what they valued, and who’s in charge of their life all come into question. Development incites confusion about one’s roles and identity: “To be confused about this existential identity makes you a riddle to yourself and to many, perhaps even most, other people” (Erikson and Erikson, 1997, 110). Not being understood by oneself or others makes it difficult for a person in transition to elicit the reassurance they crave (Taylor, 2006). To be between developmental stages is to be in flux: the old way of experiencing life no longer works; the new has not yet emerged; one finds oneself in strange territory where no clear rules apply. To be a growing, developing person means, again and again, to return to the experience of feeling nothing is holding you.

Loss: Grief and Depression, Anger and Fear

Intrinsically, development involves loss. Repeatedly in life, for as long as a person develops, s/he will lose her very sense of self, and the way of life that went with it. Whether it occurs voluntarily or otherwise, abandoning one’s self is a necessary ingredient for growth: “all transitions involve leaving a consolidated self behind before any new self can take its place” (Kegan, 1982, 232). The work of developmental transition is good-bye work:

... to terminate a time in one’s life: to accept the losses the termination entails; to review and evaluate the past; to decide which aspects of the past to keep and which to reject; and to consider one’s wishes and possibilities for the future. One is suspended between past and future, and struggling to overcome the gap that separates them. Much from the past must be given up – separated from, cut out of one’s life... renounced in sadness or grief. (Levinson, 1978, 51)

At its core, says Wilber, loss is about dying: “each of the major milestones of self-development is marked by a difficult life-death battle, involving the death (or the disidentifying with, or the transcendence) of each level, which can often be quite traumatic” (2000, 36).

No wonder, then, that the work of moving from one developmental stage to another can be a catalyst for moodiness, for depression. Some theorists describe depression as the outcome of a person’s resisting the demand to change and grow. In Western nations, perhaps the most socially acceptable form of resistance is workaholism. Workaholism – the compulsive exercise of personal agency – seems an understandable way to try countering the experience of confusion and vulnerability inherent in development. Other developmental theorists identify depression as a development prerequisite of sorts: a necessary embarking on the archetypal “Night Sea Journey” (Staude, 1981).

There seems no getting around the fact that developmental journeys are lonely work. For some, the journeys are angering as well. For some, releasing one’s past ideas, values, and identity can only happen by repudiating them. Kegan explores this idea with an

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interesting example: “Could the ‘terrible twos’ with their rampant negativism and declarations of ‘No!’ be a communication to the [child’s] old self... more than to those exasperated parents? ... When the new balance becomes more secure, the infant will have less of a need to ‘protest too much’ and the parents will become ‘others’ rather than ‘not-me’s’” (1982, 83). Anger may well be a useful tool for developing adults.

So too might fear. An argument can be made that development is good throughout a person’s life. For some, fear of remaining stuck in a stage of life that no longer “fits” may be impetus to face the other fear: fear of an uncertain future. And the kinds of radical change that occur throughout an adult’s life can indeed be fearful. Jung observed how terrifying it is for people to allow the dissolution of their persona (the social masks people wear) at times in life (Staudé, 1981). Abandoning one’s sense of themselves is, for most people, threatening. How will I be seen by others: mocked? rejected?

Development during the adult years can be an emotionally-charged experience. Much is at stake. The rules are unclear. Things are being lost, and that hurts. It’s worrying. Disequilibrium is inherently unsteady. However, all this is but a negative, and partial, view of the experience of development in adulthood.

RESILIENCE: WEATHERING DEVELOPMENT’S DISEQUILIBRIUM WELL

Some psychological resource is needed for a person to healthfully weather the vicissitudes of adult life – adulthood can be difficult, even traumatic, after all. Resilience is that resource. Inherent to understanding resilience is that one must be exposed to significant threat (Ungar, Toste, and Heath, 2010) to develop it. The fruits of resilience cannot be tasted without having weathered substantial difficulty.

I’ve noted that those of us who contemplate development are reticent to contemplate development’s difficulties – vulnerability, loss, grief, and other painful emotions among them. Likewise, the psychological resiliency literature reveals similar reticence. Some resilience theorists have described resilient children as “invulnerable steel dolls” (Walsh 2101). Others describe resilience as the capacity to withstand or remain unaffected by painful circumstances (Brenner, Bush, and Moses, 2010), to be unscathed by major disruptions in life (Walsh, 2010), or to return, defying the threat of change, to one’s original state (Akhtar and Wrenn, 2008). Walsh, 2010 disagrees.

While the longing for things to return to “normal” is understandable, resilience offers the hope of a better prize: “positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000). Speaking to the differing views of what psychological resilience means to researchers, Walsh argues:

It is a common misconception that resilience means invulnerability; vulnerability is a part of the human condition. Nor is resilience simply the ability to bounce back unscathed. Rather, resilience involves struggling well, effectively working through

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and learning from adversity, and integrating the experience into the fabric of individual and shared life passage. (2010, 149)

An argument can be made that the resilience literature pertains to trauma, to catastrophic misfortune that befalls people periodically through life, rather than to the comparatively mild experience of developmental change through the human lifespan. (Akhtar and Wrenn, 2008) disagree, interpreting resilience's focus on return to some kind of equilibrium as "not only a response to trauma but to change in general" (p. 4). These authors and others argue that, at its essence, resilience pertains to healthful ways of adapting to any disequilibrating human experience (Akhtar and Wrenn, 2008). For this reason, resilience is a fruitful psychological resource to consider when we consider development in adult life.

RESILIENCE TRAINING: BEING A DEVELOPMENT-OPEN PERSON

In North America, much research has focused on protective psychological and social factors that enable resilience (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, and Reed, 2009; Ungar et al., 2010). This approach concerns me, in that seeking ways to protect oneself from disturbances to the psychological equilibrium we experience in adulthood benefits us less than a stance of openness to experiences of disequilibria that can foster human development and resilience. While disequilibrium is often emotionally difficult, it is more than a damaging process beset by daunting impediments.

Rather, if we take resilience to be a healthy way of emerging from challenging experiences of disequilibrium that occur through life and a "systems skill" for meeting disequilibrium in adult life, we ought to examine what exactly it means to "struggle well," "work through," and "learn from" developmental disequilibrium, as Walsh has said. Is there a way to train oneself for resilience?

Developmental theorists have made various suggestions to strengthen one's psychological capacity to enter into and pass through encounters with disequilibrium (Consedine and Magai, 2006). No single way of meeting developmental shifts invariably works (Walsh, 2010). Accordingly, I present here a variety of ways to support the development of resilience, by: acknowledging one's present developmental stage, healing one's past, maintaining helpful relationships, and encouraging learning about oneself and the surrounding world.

Respecting One's Current Place

It is understandable to take a negative view on developmental transitions. Erikson tells us that development is a matter of continual crises one must face (Erikson and Erikson, 1997). Torbert writes about sometimes-wildly-oscillating moment-by-moment experience with no discernable middle ground (Torbert, 1976). Kegan describes each developmental stage as imbalanced (Kegan, 1982), a description that surely intensifies during transition. Growth can feel chaotic. But there is reason for a positive view.

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Theorists recognize that chaos necessarily accompanies major transition, and that from it great creativity can arise.

Put differently, there is great dignity to every developmental stage and the transitions between them (Kegan, 1982; 2000). Wherever we are in the developmental spectrum, we already possess the lessons of prior transformations, and capabilities that can serve us well (Kegan, 2000). In short, where we are may not be comfortable, but it's not all bad. What may be necessary is not alarm, but rather

... reassurance that this discomfort will not go on forever. One way to offer this reassurance is to... understand that [one is] in 'grave danger of growing' and to provide more information about the journey on which [one] may indeed already have embarked. It is a lot easier to make a rugged trek up the mountain when one believes that an exciting new vista awaits at the top. (Taylor, 2006, 231)

In fact, what may be necessary is to enter into the challenges of one's present developmental stage: "the more we go within, the more we go beyond" (Wilber, 2000, 106).

The Past Comes Back – Fortunately

While development would seem to be about moving forward, psychoanalytic theorists well know that a person's history will regularly reassert itself, and can obstruct healthy growth. Levinson notes that "developmental impairments and defeats from the past may prevent a man from beginning a new period and working on its tasks. He is then in a state of decline" (1978, 319). Erikson's view is that every developmental dilemma that remains unresolved continues, preventing one's ability to resolve future dilemmas as well. However, the resurgence of past issues is good news, then. During the current period, a person has an opportunity to address the past in more capable ways, thereby building a stronger foundation for future growth. The task, then, in each stage of development, is to (1) understand that stage, (2) identify dilemmas from the past that may block that stage's unfolding, and (3) work to meet the requirements of both past and present. The resurgence of the past can instigate "regression in the service of development" (Erikson and Erikson, 1997; Wilber, 2000). And psychological mechanisms such as transference that arise from people's past can be mechanisms of growth.

The Feedback of Companions

Whether or not growth happens through an adult's life depends, in part, on getting useful feedback from the people who surround them. Why feedback? As discussed, we cannot readily see the developmental stage, or worldview, in which we are currently embedded. To move beyond one's present developmental place is to "shift away from being 'made up by' the values and expectations... that get uncritically internalized and with which one becomes identified, toward developing an internal authority that makes choices about these... values and expectations" (Kegan, 2000, 59). Development is aided by helping a

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person to “make explicit key aspects of their process of learning and knowing that have been largely implicit” (Taylor, 2006, 211); development “requires that one understands and questions what one has previously taken for granted” (Fisher and Torbert, 1995, 89). Helpful in this process is finding one or more companions willing to provide useful feedback. Feedback is not always welcome, given that the most developmentally useful kind involves challenging one’s current sense of identity; (Torbert, 1972) notes that such disconfirming feedback is only received when a person is willing to pay attention to it. The kind of companions Torbert recommends is “a circle of friends willing to act as enemies” (Torbert, 1972, 169).

Amidst the self-challenging feedback needed for development, then, is reassurance – not an assuaging of the discomforts involved in changing, but reassurance that the feelings and person experiencing them are valuable and cared about. Kegan considers such companionship so crucial that successful transition may well depend on “how [one] is received, nurtured, and contradicted by the culture which holds him” (Kegan, 1982, 143). The need for being “received” suggests a lifelong developmental role for Winnicott’s concept of the “holding environment.” Taylor comments, “Throughout the life span, the developmental holding environment consists of holding on, letting go, and sticking around, or confirmation, contradiction, and continuity” (2006, 214).

Development requires the support of companions. With companions, people can begin to examine themselves and their surroundings to “separate what they feel from what they should feel, what they value from what they should value, and what they want from what they should want” (Kegan, 2000). Paradoxically, the involvement of others enables us to identify our individual wishes and needs.

Exposure to What Makes No Sense

Each level of development represents a way of being that makes no sense to the level beneath it (Kegan, 1982; Wilber, 2000). It follows, then, that a way to begin bridging one’s current and future developmental stage is to actively seek out experiences and ideas that you don’t currently understand. Sources of such ideas and experiences are many: disconfirming feedback from people we know, time spent with people (or cultures, or age groups) unfamiliar to us, exposure to new (particularly strange-seeming) ideas. Each of these creates opportunities for a person to encounter difference, a crucial muscle to build if we are to learn to be open to transforming into higher stages of development. Such transformation, as we’ve said, amounts to a re-creation of who we are. “An act of creating starts with confrontation with new information for which there is no existing category” (Troll, 1982, 155). Being a development-open person requires that one learn to handle uncertainty (Scheibe, Kunzmann, and Baltes, 2009) and actively collaborate with contradiction.

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Building Relationship With the Unconscious

A readily-available source of contradiction is oneself. Each person is a mass of incongruous drives, motivations, emotions, and ideas. While we each possess a conscious understanding of who we are and what we want, we also possess unconscious understandings that may differ widely from our sphere of normal awareness. Jung conceived the ego as that aspect of a person who carries conscious understanding. “In all other Western scientific theories of human development, a strong ego is viewed as the goal of human development throughout the life cycle. For Jung, on the other hand, the ego, though very important, is neither the centre nor the goal of human development, which is the realization of the Self, of wholeness” (Staude, 1981, 84). For Jung, the Self represented the governing force in each person’s life, a force of which most of us are unaware. A powerful way to become open to development is to develop one’s “ego-Self axis” (Edinger, 1992) – essentially, to become aware of aspects of oneself that typically one does not notice (or want to notice). There are many ways to do this. Through quieting the mind (via relaxation, meditation, or other means), a person can learn to notice one’s dreams and fantasies, defenses, physical responses, and emotional reactions to the life s/he is living. Each of these can provide a person with important data about his/her deepest values, hypocrisies, motivations, and untapped capabilities. A non-defensive, curious quality of attention to oneself is a potent force for being open to development (Kashdan and Silvia, 2009).

Reflection-in-Action

So too is a non-defensive, curious quality of attention to the moment-by-moment experiences of daily life. Torbert is a particularly vocal advocate for learning from experience. For him, “a person’s senses and feelings [are]... receptors of feedback about the state of his own organism and his relationship to the environment” (1972, p. 8). For him, daily life is rich with opportunities to learn experientially, to “self-observe while-in-action.” The goal of such observation is to garner a depth of both intellectual and affective understanding about the developmental state one currently inhabits. It involves

... a process of opening feedback channels, so that people begin to become aware of their impact on one another, begin to become aware of, and learn the meaning of, their feelings as they relate to their own and others’ behaviour, and begin to learn how to achieve goals that are personally meaningful to them through the use of intra- and inter-personal feedback. (Torbert, 1972, 9)

By learning to watch ourselves-in-action, we can understand the consequences of our current developmental level, its benefits and detriments, and, over time, can make choices to un-embed ourselves from that level (Kegan, 1982; 2000).

Courage

To many developmentalists, the consequences of being un-self-aware are concerning: “If we remain out of contact with our activity of choosing what we attend to, we fall into patterns of choice (values) determined by external pressures of which we are unaware. Our actions become more and more alienated both from our inner responses and from

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new situational characteristics” (Torbert, 1972, 21). And yet, human as we are, our tendency is to defend against becoming aware of ways that our current self-understanding is open to question: part of us would rather not see that self-understanding crumble. Being a person open to the tremendous changes development brings requires bravery.

Development-openness demands we know ourselves, moment-by-moment. It demands we take risks to live in accordance with our deepest values, even when they don’t make sense to us or those around us. Developing to higher levels requires tremendous openness to change:

... a person must undergo a to-him unimaginable scale of self-development before he becomes capable of relationally valid action. Moreover, this self-development includes not only disciplining and freeing emotions and behaviour – the personal elements often neglected by contemporary education – but also disciplining and freeing oneself for higher thought – thought capable of tracing the patterns of intuition, feeling and behaviour as they actually occur. Only such thought remains open to the mystery-revelation of each new moment, open to one’s own and the environment’s implications. Such thought is necessary if one is to engage in inquiry while in action, if one is to see and realize one’s possibilities. (Torbert, 1976, 167-168)

Complexity theorists note that new, emergent order does not arise if elements of a system merely coexist. Interaction is imperative. I have argued that people can move through developmental disequilibrium in a way that cultivates adaptive resilience by actively, mindfully interacting with the psychological state in which they currently are situated; with the wounds of their history; with helpful companions here-and-now; with ideas and experiences that make little sense to one’s current worldview; with one’s own unconscious processes; and with moment-by-moment experience of daily life. All people have access to these dimensions of human experience; therefore resilience-cultivating resources are available to each of us, should we choose to engage them. Developmental tasks – resilience training – involves such interaction.

DISCUSSION

What is possible if one does embrace developmental work is encounters with disequilibrium through life that bring latent psychological capacities to the fore. It may well be that “every individual needs revolution, inner division, overthrow of the existing order, and renewal” (Staude, 1981, xv), but it seems unlikely that this is an emotionless experience. I have described several painful affective reactions to the disequilibrium inherent in adult development. This is a one-sided view. Also possible are expansive emotions.

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Amidst the repeated defeats and mini-deaths of life-span development, abandoning whatever you last relied on for your identity can be a triumphant victory. It can feel liberating. For some, releasing an outgrown life phase can feel like new-found freedom (Fisher and Torbert, 1995). With each stage of development, a person becomes “more uniquely individual. Acquiring a clearer and fuller identity of his own, he becomes better able to utilize his inner resources and pursue his own aims” (Levinson, 1978, 33). This can feel deeply satisfying. It can feel “extremely positive, literally ‘ecstatic’” (Kegan, 1982, 231). Although the emotional flavour of development through adulthood can be painful, it can also be playful, open, independent, and expansive.

Caveats

This paper about adult development has not specifically focused on development of ego, cognition, epistemology, personality, spirituality, sexuality, morality, or any of the other reputable models that exist in the field of developmental psychology. It does not address the important influences of gender or biological aging. There is much this paper has not addressed. But what it has tried to do is portray adult development as a lifelong relationship with one’s history, and also with one’s beckoning future. Suffering is part of development – not pathological, but necessary suffering that always accompanies uncertainty and loss. The prize to be won is “integrity... a sense of coherence and wholeness” (Erikson and Erikson, 1997, 64-65) that can grow for as long as one develops.

The cultures in which we live, however, may seek to deprive us of developmental opportunities. Torbert has written of his struggle with the consequences of helping people to develop in Western culture: “However nice it might be for students to become individuated, society and public schools do not in fact encourage individual differences, so permitting kids to develop individual differences... would only give them more problems when they returned to school. ... We had to make our students mediocre to survive in society” (Torbert, 1976, 114-115). Kegan feels this concern with respect to adults:

One of the grimmer features of modern American life is that many people (perhaps most people) live today without this community context. Among its most important benefits is its capacity to recognize a person, a marriage, a family, over time, and to help the developing system recognize itself amid the losses and recoveries of normal growth. Without their support – without the pressure to remain at those times when we want to repudiate real people along with old constructions of these people – we may ‘run away from home’ and unfortunately, given our adult abilities to provide for ourselves, we are not forced to return when it gets dark. (1982, 217)

Levinson, too, worries: “Society is now doing better at keeping people healthy after 40. The more difficult problem is to foster psychological well-being and provide the conditions for a satisfying, productive life in... adulthood” (1978, 329).

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Nearly every developmental theorist consulted for this research expressed a view that cultural context matters for development in adult life, and that Western culture (from which all of these particular theorists arose) can hamper the developmental processes of adults living within it. As I've said, the developmental process can be viewed as a process of continual building of worldviews and behaviours that are later dismantled and destroyed. While an adult may go through many interactions of self-building and destruction, cultures move more slowly. As contexts of a particular worldview, operating on the foundation of particular behaviours, a culture will reward members who remain loyal to the status quo. *Status quo* and *development* are antithetical. If, as I have argued, resilience is an attribute gained through lifelong developmental processes, the impact of culture bodes poorly for the cultivation of a resilient population.

Many systems adherents have argued that "systems thinking" in its myriad forms should be considered an important human competency. A conception of mental health recently put forth in the nascent field of positive psychology is that it results in "the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity" (Keyes, 2009, 90). Given that states of disequilibrium are characteristic of the systemic complexity of any human system, the ability to effectively navigate developmental transitions in life is both a cognitive and affective part of systems thinking. Given that states of disequilibrium will emerge for as long as a person continues to develop through life, approaching them with "systems thinking," with openness, will build resilience.

While complexity theory has reframed chaos as a value-neutral stage of disequilibrium, systems scientists interested in psychological systems must not overlook the value judgments humans place on disequilibrium. In our personal lives, most of us greet disequilibrium with aversion. And yet, disequilibrium is inherent in human development, in growth. Development is difficult work. Many people actively avoid the challenge to develop, to grow because of the negative emotions the process can engender. In that regard, affect can inhibit development.

However, there are strong cases to be made for seeking to develop oneself. Einstein is said to have noted that the world's problems cannot be solved from the same level of consciousness that created them. Development through adult life amounts to the achievement of successively deeper and more complex levels of consciousness. However, while aging is inevitable, developing is not. The mental health profession can attest that many people are disabled by disequilibrating traumas, that become psychological pathologies, which arrest further development.

Neurologists have come to understand that the human nervous system is remarkably plastic, giving us "the capacity to recover, albeit with scars" (Shapiro, 2008, 122). While periods of developmental transition, of disequilibrium, give rise to feelings of vulnerability, "at the same time new growth is likely to appear. The vulnerability breaks things up a bit. The resilience enables transformation and growth" (ibid). Rather than

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eroding a person's capacity to cope, the big and small adversities of adult life can make one harder and more resilient (Walsh, 2010).

We needn't anticipate waiting for traumatic life events to trigger the kinds of disequilibrium that can provoke resilience:

Of all the knowledge gained from research on developmental resilience, one conclusion stands out: resilience... arises from ordinary processes.... Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the operations of ordinary human systems in the biology and psychology [of people], from their relationships in the family and community, and from schools, religions, cultures, and other aspects of societies (Masten et al., 2009, 129).

This article has proposed several "training practices" that can facilitate resilient development in adults, and strengthen their ability to effectively work through the disequilibrium of developmental transition.

Parting Thought

Pyramids are commonly used to illustrate phenomena wherein the numbers of people existing at higher levels is increasingly small. Many theorists would agree that such an image accurately portrays human development in the world's adult population. The more deep and complex the psychological worldview, the fewer people have attained it. Given Einstein's admonition about the relationship between the world's problems and the limitations of the levels of consciousness that created those problems, we might aspire to a world with greater numbers of people at the top, of a developmental world we would illustrate with a trapezoid in place of the pyramid of the past.

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