# Meaning-Making Models of Development

Robert Kegan’s Meaning-making Model describes how we construct meaning and systems of thinking about ourselves and the world. This is a natural process of one’s interactive experience with the world. We will consider the implications of his ideas for adult development, especially from our reading of An Everyone Culture, where his ideas about the Socialized Mind, Self-authoring Mind, and Self-transforming Mind are applied and described in ways that are more clear and accessible. Yet, to obtain a deeper understanding of Kegan’s theory, we are exploring his earliest works. These “Minds” from An Everyone Culture, were originally described as Interpersonal, Institutional, and Interindividual evolutionary truces or balances. He avoids the word “stages.” They are numbered 3,4,5 in his original model respectively (we will see how the term "stages" is inadequate). Kegan’s theory draws from and integrates three different psychological traditions: 1) humanistic and existential-phenomenological, 2) neo-psychoanalytic, and 3) constructive-developmental (as well as dialectical philosophy).

According to ChatGPT, some of the strengths of Robert Kegan's meaning-making model of development include how it:

* Emphasizes the role of subjective experience in development
* Holistic view of development including intellectual, emotional, and social aspects
* Focuses on the development of personal meaning rather than just knowledge acquisition
* Recognizes that development is a lifelong process
* Can be applied to individuals at all stages of development
* Encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own development
* Provides a framework for understanding and facilitating change in individuals and organizations

In a coaching or therapy context, Robert Kegan's meaning-making model could be used to help individuals understand and reflect on their current stage of development and identify areas for growth. For instance, a coach might use the model to help a client identify their dominant beliefs, assumptions, and defenses, and then explore how these shape their perception of reality and experiences. This process can lead to increased self-awareness and facilitate personal change by encouraging the individual to evolve to a higher stage of development.

In an organizational development context, Kegan's model could be used to identify the developmental level of a team or organization, and then design interventions to help the team or organization evolve to a higher stage of meaning-making. The model can be used to help create a shared language around the team's or organization's current strengths and weaknesses, and to facilitate a shift toward a more collective, collaborative, and adaptive culture.



## The Unrecognized Genius of Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget stands prominently in the constructive-developmental tradition that influences Kegan’s theory. Kegan draws from Piaget’s discoveries that children have fundamentally different ways of understanding the world. Let’s begin by considering Piaget’s contributions. Based on your prior studies of Piaget and this reading, discuss some of Piaget’s unrecognized genius. What aspects of Piaget’s theory does Kegan seem to draw from?

Both Kegan and Piaget emphasize fundamentally different (i.e., qualitatively different) worldviews and meaning-making systems about the physical word… stages that emerge from genetic epistemology. Likewise, for Kegan, each truce/balance represents “manifestations of a distinct and separate reality, with a logic, a consistency, and integrity all its own.” When have you appreciated that the world of a child was fundamentally different than your own?

Both Kegan and Piaget are constructive-developmental (Kegan, 1982, p. 26). Piaget brought together in one man a passion for both philosophy (the constructive them) and biology (the developmental)… from the beginning, Piaget maintained that he was not a psychologist himself, but a genetic epistemologist (development and construction brought together)

* The world of a baby before object permanence
* The preoperational child’s fantasy and use of language
* The preoperational child’s lack of conservation
* The child’s inability to consider hypotheticals that contradict the concrete, physical world

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| Stage | Subject (“Structure”) | Object (“Content”) |
| Sensorimotor | Action-sensations reflexes | None |
| Preoperational | Perceptions | Action-sensations reflexes |
| Concrete operational | Reversibilities (the “actual”) | Perceptions |
| Formal operational | Hypothetico-deduction (the “possible”) | Reversibilities (the “actual”) |

“According to Piaget, development is driven by the process of equilibration. Equilibration encompasses assimilation (i.e., people transform incoming information so that it fits within their existing thinking) and accommodation (i.e, people adapt their thinking to incoming information). Equilibration (and assimilation, accommodation)- from https://books.byui.edu/-onn

Piaget suggested that equilibration takes place in three phases:

1. Children are satisfied with their mode of thought and therefore are in a state of equilibrium.
2. They become aware of the shortcomings in their existing thinking and are dissatisfied (i.e., are in a state of disequilibration and experience cognitive conflict).
3. They adopt a more sophisticated mode of thought that eliminates the shortcomings of the old one (i.e., reach a more stable equilibrium).”

What we can draw from Piaget are two points: “First, that each stage is plausibly the consequence of a given subject-object balance or evolutionary truce. Second, the process of movement is plausibly the evolutionary motion of differentiation (or emergence from embeddedness) and reintegration (relation to, rather than embeddedness in, the world)” (Kegan, 1982, p. 39)

### Active Learning Activities



Was the Guinness Book of World Records popular when you were a kid?  When was this book popular?  Do you remember what grade it was?  Why might that have been the case according to Piaget?

Consider how more advanced, abstract understandings are not possible for people to have without their first having less advanced, more concrete experiences. Can you think of an example?

Consider the example of Langer:  The child had a large number of black and white beads that are all wooden.  If you ask children put all the black beads on one side of the table and all the wooden beads on the other.  How might young children age 4 respond?  How might children age 9 respond?

## Kegan’s Orders of Consciousness

### Incorporative Balance/Truce/Plateau 0- (Infancy)

Subject: Reflexes (the infants are their reflexes and their environment: mother etc)

Object: Nothing

In their beginnings, babies are all subjective and have really no appreciation of anything objective at all, and therefore no real self-awareness. This is to say, at first, babies have little idea how to interpret anything, and the only perspective they have with which to interpret things is their own scarcely developed perspective. They can recognize parent's faces and the like, but this sort of recognition should not be confused with babies being able to appreciate that parents are separate creatures with their own needs. This key recognition doesn't occur for years.

The sense of self is not developed at this point in time. There is no self to speak of because there is no distinction occurring yet between self and other. To the baby, there is not any reason to ask the question, "Who am I?" because the baby's mind is nothing more and nothing less than the experience of its senses as it moves about. In an important sense, the baby is embedded in its sensory experience and has no other awareness.

At some point, it occurs to the baby that it has reflexes that it can use and sensory tools that it can experience. Reflex and sensation are thus the first mental objects; the first things that are understood to be distinct components of the self. The sense of self emerges from the knowledge that there are things in the world that are not self (like reflexes and senses); things that I am not.

"Rather than literally being my reflexes, I now have them, and "I" am something other. "I" am that which coordinates or mediates the reflexes..."

### Impulsive Balance/Truce/Plateau 1 (Early Childhood)

Subject: Impulses, impulses and perceptions

Object: Reflexes

Kegan correspondingly refers to this second period of social appreciation development as Impulsive, to suggest that the child is now embedded in impulses – which are those things that coordinate reflexes. The sense of self at this balance of life would be comfortable saying something like, "hungry", or "sleepy", being fully identified with these hungers. Though babies are now aware that they can take action to fulfill a need, they still are not clear that other people exist yet as independent creatures. From the perspective of the Impulsive mind, a parent is merely another reflex that can be brought to bear to satisfy impulses.

### Imperial Balance/Truce/Plateau: Balance 2 (Adolescence)

Subject: Needs, interests, desires (take others' feelings into account)

Object: Impulses, perceptions

The child as "little dictator" is born. In the prior impulsive self, the self literally is nothing more and nothing less than a set of needs. There isn't anyone "there" having those needs yet. The needs alone are all that exists. As awareness continues to rise, the child now starts to become aware that "it" is the very thing that has the needs. Because the child is now aware that it has needs (rather than is needs), it also starts to become aware that it can consciously manipulate things to get its needs satisfied. The impulsive child was also manipulative, perhaps, but in a more unaware animal manner. The imperial child is not yet aware that other people have needs too. It only knows at this balance that it has needs, and it doesn't hesitate to express them.

### Interpersonal Balance/Truce/Plateau: Balance 3: (Late adolescence, Emerging adulthood, Early adulthood) (SOCIALIZED MIND)

Adults in this Order: 58%

Subject: Interpersonal relationships, mutuality

Object: Needs, interests, desires

"I" no longer am my needs (no longer the imperial I); rather I have them. In having them I can now coordinate, or integrate, one need system with another, and in so doing, I bring into being that need-mediating reality which we refer to when we speak of mutuality."

### Institutional Balance/Truce/Plateau Balance 4 (Adulthood) (SELF-AUTHORING MIND)

Adults in this Order: 35%

Subject: Authorship, identity, ideology

Object: Interpersonal relationships, mutuality

As the sense of self continues to develop, at some point one becomes aware that a guiding principle can be established which helps determine which set of needs should take precedence under particular circumstances. This is the first moment that the individual can be said to have values, or commitments to ideas and beliefs and principles which are larger and more permanent than its own passing whims and fears.

Those who achieve this level of social maturity understand the need for laws and for ethical codes that work to govern everyone's behavior. Some individuals will not grasp why these things are important and should not simply be disregarded when they are inconvenient.

### Interindividual Balance/Truce/Plateau: Balance 5 (Late Adulthood) (SELF-TRANSFORMING MIND)

Adults in this Order: 1%

Subject: "The intern penetrability of self-systems"

Object: Authorship, identity, ideology

The next evolution of self-understanding occurs when one starts to realize that there is more than one way of being "fair" or "honest" or "brave" in the world. Whereas before, in the interpersonal mindset, there is only one possible right way to interpret a social event (e.g., in accordance with one's own value system), a newly developed InterIndividiual mindset starts to recognize a diversity of ways that someone might act and still be acting in accordance with a coherent value system (though not necessarily one's own value system).

### Other Concepts in Kegan’s Developmental Model

#### Human “Being” is Human Meaning-Making

* Meaning-making is part of human nature. Being is a verb = making meaning out of experiences, organizing and constructing coherent systems of understanding out of our experiences.  
  p. 44-45
* “I use the word “meaning” to refer to this simultaneously epistemological and ontological activity; it is about knowing and being, about theory-making and investments and commitments of the self”
* Confirmation bias might suggest that the world is not inherently good or bad but we construct it to be.

#### Constructive-Developmental

* We create or construct meaning. Meaning is not independent, objective, or inherent; meaning is not something out there to be discovered.
* Meaning is constructed through interacting experience with the world (culture, etc.). The person creates their world and the world creates the person (p. 114)
* What is “most important for us to know in understanding one another is not the other’s experience, but what the experience means to him or her” (p. 113).
* In order to understand one another, we need to understand the underlying logic, or what Kegan calls “psychologic,” used to shape meaning.

#### Development is Evolutionary Motion

* Our development is in constant motion, moving, vacillating from states of dynamic balance. Development is never static. It is always living moving.
* We are always trying to find balance in our worldview and meaning making, systems
* p. 41 Kegan describes how preoperational children evolve not because they listen more carefully to tutoring grownups or something unfolds within them, but “because of their own activity in the world, evolutionary activity.” Kegan calls this evolution of meaning.
* Similarly, Edward Thorndike’s Law of Effect is basically natural selection applied to behavior. Those behaviors that are well-suited to the environment survive and perpetuate while those behaviors that are ill-suited to the environment become extinct.
* Activity in the world is evolutionary activity.

#### Our Consciousness can be Characterized in Terms of Subject & Object

* Consciousness could be understood as one’s relationship between self and world (self and other).
* Subjective being unable to understand what you look like to someone else is the essence and definition of what it means to be subjective about yourself.
* Object is being able to see a new perspective, reflect (or operate) on our own perspective.
* The root (ject) refers to a motion, an activity rather than a thing – more particularly to throw. Thus, object suggests the motion or consequence of “thrown from” or “thrown away from” (Kegan, 1982, p. 76).
* Subject is the embeddedness which we cannot operate on / or see a new perspective. Kid crying because can’t have toy. They are their desires, have not realized that they have desires.

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| Some Dialectic Aspects of Robert Kegan’s Model (inspired by pgs 44-45) |
| Me | Not Me/World |
| Self | Other |
| Familiar & Known | Unfamiliar & Unknown |
| Assimilation | Accommodation |
| Self-preservation | Self-transformation |
| Closed | Open to new possibility |
| "All limit" (no hope) | "All possibility" (hope) |

“These periods of dynamic balance amounts to a kind of evolutionary truce: ... The guiding principle of such a truce - the point that is always at issue and is renegotiated in the transition to each new balance - is what, from the point of view of the organism, is composed as object and what as subject.”

#### Humans are “Embedduals”

* The term embeddual implies that we are usually embedded in our own meaning-making systems (evolutionary balances) that we cannot separate ourselves from them; it is our own consciousness. Understandably, individuals are embedded in and subject to their own consciousness and meaning-making systems.
* Consider how high schoolers identify with cliques or groups and stereotype others by their friends and groups.

#### Each Balance/truce is a Temporary Balance of Subject-Object Relations

* One’s developmental evolution can be marked by their ability to operate on their previously embedded experience and worldview.
* Our state of balance becomes imbalanced when we have experiences that contradict our worldviews. We become balanced when we repudiate new understandings, return to our prior worldview, or push through difficult uncertainties and create a new meaningful organization.
* In a new worldview, meanings that were once subject have become object. Subject means that one is embedded in their own worldview; they cannot see it as a worldview.
* This ability to operate on meanings and experiences that were once subject is a qualitatively different experience of self and world. It is a different world.
* “We have begun to see not only how this subject object balance can be spoken of as a deep structure in meaning-evolution, but also that there is something regular about the process of evolution itself. Growth always involves a process of differentiation, of the emergence from embeddedness, thus creating out of the former subject a new object to be taken by the new subjectivity.”

#### The Holding Environment (aka Culture of Embeddedness) Simultaneously Fulfills 3 Functions in Development- Confirmation, Contradiction, and Continuity (see roughly pages 149-156)

* Holding environment describes the system that surrounds each embedded
* The first holding environment is the womb, and each holding environment can be examined in terms of confirmation (holding on), contradiction (letting go), and continuity (staying put).

#### Confirmation (holding on)

* This is holding on to the current worldview and embeddedness
* The environment embraces, accepts, recognizes and confirms that this is how the person is and what they have become
* This is the first requirement of care and responsiveness

#### Contradiction (letting go)

* Contradicting one’s worldview, pushing for change(s) with demandingness
* Something is not working effectively like it once was, asking someone to grow up take more responsibility
* More effective when there is also confirmation; e.g., with children you still can accept them as they are, you just ask them to do a little bit more to be a little better. In other words, you invite them to grow and develop.

#### Continuity (staying put)

* Providing the familiarity of prior “stages” (i.e., orders of consciousness) and understandings without a complete return to prior world.
* Frederick Leboyer’s *Birth Without Violence* provides an example of providing continuity as familiarity for the baby; such continuity allows the newborn to stay put in the new world
* Objects refer to “bridges” which can be a person, a comfort blanket, a love note. These objects or bridges help one to continue with development

#### Natural Therapy: “Relationships Heal”

“Who comes into a person’s life may be the single greatest factor of influence to what that life becomes.” It is our recruitability, as much as our knowledge of what to do once drawn, that makes us of value in our caring for another’s development, whether the caring is the professional caring of teacher, therapist, pastor, or mental health worker, or the more spontaneous exercises of careful parenthood, friendship, and love.

For Kegan (1982), psychology has become a secular religion and the practice of psychotherapy has become the “new priestly rite,” the impression often conveyed to the public is that the solution to life’s ills and suffering could be found in psychotherapy. Kegan suggests, rather than placing the practice of psychotherapy as the touchstone for all considerations of help, we ought to first look into the meaning and makeup those instances that occur in nature. This is what Kegan calls “natural therapy,” which offers a new guide to therapeutic practice by exposing some of the details of those [naturally occurring] interactions and make it possible to replicate the experience in therapy. In short, relationships are integral in therapy. Indeed, as far back as 1977, outcome research studies of psychotherapy have indicated that successful therapy is due more to the qualities of the therapist and not therapeutic techniques or therapy itself or (Smith & Glass, 1977).

When in counseling, Kegan views his clients not as “patients” or “sick persons” or even “persons with problems,” but from his innermost conviction he views them as “persons evolving.” This is a significant shift from the contemporary conceptualizations of suffering that are assumed in psychotherapy. Any movement which sets us against the movement of life of which we are a part, in which we are ultimately implicated, to which we are finally obligated, will cause us pain (p. 266). Kegan purports that in pain, suffering or “crisis,” we have options. We can either learn from them, or not, and he relates this assertion to the Chinese character of crisis, which can mean “danger” or “opportunity” (p. 261). For Kegan, grief, loss, and suffering may bring about death of an old worldview, from which one was embedded, a worldview that no longer works for one’s developmental motion and evolution. But “death” of the old worldview causes an emergence of a new worldview and a new developmental evolution. Challenges are a catalyst toward growth (p. 262). According to Kegan’s developmental model, experiences (good or bad, easy or difficult) can be better understood as it is related to the processes of “growth, change and transition” From this perspective, suffering is not sufficiently understood as illness (i.e. depression, anxiety) or misfortune, but better understood as a catalyst toward growth.

### Some Metaphors and Examples

#### Tree of Wisdom

There is a sculpture called the Tree of Wisdom at BYU Provo that Brother Skalski really enjoyed during his studies there. After studying Robert Kegan’s Meaning Making Model of Development, consider what is similar about this Tree of Wisdom. [Use this Tree of Wisdom link](https://3dwarehouse.sketchup.com/model/6e7c50da2958b0bd480253602c5d05da/Tree-of-Wisdom?hl=en) and imagine walking around this sculpture to make connections with your studies of Kegan’s Model.



Does this remind you about an experience in your own life?

#### Thomas, the Doubter

Many have a negative view of Thomas, as Thomas the doubter. This is a rather simplified caricature of this noble apostle. He could not really denounce the accounts and testimonies of Christ’s appearances. Rather, there was something about resurrection, with its corporeal, glorified body that was different than the restorations to life to which he was a witness. He denied this new and unfamiliar thing; it was too revolutionary for the way he thought about the world, universe, and himself, and he resisted. We should be more kind with our thoughts about Thomas. In some experiences of our lives, we are no different and resistance is natural.



Consider your own experience. Can you relate?

#### Flatland

Flatland by A Square (Edwin A. Abbot) is a classic!  [Flatland: A Romance in Many Dimensions](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/201/201-h/201-h.htm) is available for free. It is a short and humorous book that uses points, lines, and both 2 dimensional and 3 dimensional shapes to describe increasing dimensions and complexity. It encourages consideration about how God could exist in another dimension, almost totally foreign to everyone.



How is this like Kegan’s Meaning-making Model of Development? In Flatland, like Kegan, each meaningful understanding of the world is essentially its own world or dimension.

#### My Own Research

My own research has focused on life-altering transformation, and we will examine it later in the semester. One on my participants described the psychological conflict he was experiencing, and how he was holding on until he was compelled to let go of his conception: “And so I was almost just compelled to let go, to let it go… because if I didn’t, if I held on to that, it was just going to destroy me.” This quote captures the developmental motion of our meaning-making experience.



Can you relate to being compelled to grow in similar ways?

## Active Learning Activity



Match each interview excerpt with the correction coding according to Kegan’s developmental plateaus. In each, it is important to not just focus on the content (e.g., a person can speak about relationships at any stage but is not necessarily caused by relationships like one in the socialized (interpersonal) mind). You should try to focus most on what the person takes responsibility for.

These are the possible answers (i.e. the correction coding):

1. Socialized mind with aspects of the Imperial mind remaining
2. Socialized mind with aspects of the Self-authoring mind emerging
3. Self-authoring mind
4. Self-transforming mind with remnants of the Self-Authoring mind remaining

### Interview Excerpts

1. But now I just go out more on my own if that's what I want to do. (How does that work?] It's not good for me to be so dependent on Randy. Randy helps me to see that. He keeps saying I have to do more what I want to do and I really do feel that it's important for me to decide myself. [Why is that important to you deciding for yourself?] I'm an adult, and I think it is time that I started making my own decisions, don't you think?
2. I'm really sad that S. lied to me. Because I was counting on him to tell the truth. Not, you know, that he has to, but that he should want to. CAN YOU SAY WHY HIS LYING TO YOU MAKES YOU SAD? Well because, why would he want to lie? Maybe he didn't think he could count on me. CAN YOU SAY WHAT MAKES YOU SAD ABOUT THAT? Well, I'm sad if maybe he feels I let him down, like maybe he couldn't trust me. I wish if he thought that he would tell me. WHY WOULD YOU WANT HIM TO TELL YOU? So I could remind him he can count on me and help him feel he can trust me. I'd like us to work this out so I don't feel bad about him lying and so he doesn't feel he can't trust me. WHY IS THAT IMPORTANT TO YOU? Because it's not right he should be feeling bad because he can't trust me, and I should be feeling bad because he lied. I shouldn't be even thinking of or wondering whether he's somebody I can count on, because really we should both just be wanting to let the other one know that we can trust each other. WHY IS THAT? Well, that's just what friendship is.
3. I just go by myself now. Randy doesn't like it a lot of the time but I think it's not only better for me but better for us. I've just had to accept that fact that there are some things I'm not going to get from him and he has to do the same thing. He's married to a woman who likes to go on nature hikes and see art exhibits and though he doesn't like to do either of those and doesn't have to do them, he has to understand that I do and that sometimes I'm going to do these things rather than be with him. I know he doesn't like it but I try not to dwell on that. And I'm aware that there's this part of me that doesn't want him to either- I find it much easier when he doesn't dwell on his not liking my going out. (What makes it hard if he does dwell on that?) Well I just have to work hard to remember that although I can be sad about his not liking it, I do think it's very important for me to honor my own interests. [It's very important.] Yes, because I'm not me if I don't.
4. Last week Michael was telling me about an important feeling he had was important to him because I felt my being an understanding, sympathetic listener would be the way I could be most helpful. But then he asked me how I would have felt in his situation. So I said, "You know, I was feeling like really listening to you, creating a space for you to talk this out, out loud, thinking that would be the most help I could be." And he said back to me, "But that's not what I really want from you. I know how I feel, and I'm really wanting to understand if there's another way I could be putting this experience together." Well, it really surprised me that my first instinct at helping was one that he wouldn't feel helped by since I feel like we're so tuned into each other's needs. But what was really amazing was that when I actually jumped in to exploring right along with him, not just how he felt, but how I would have felt, I discovered another "good" reason why I might not have thought to respond to him differently when he asked me whether I would have been hurt. I had thought, as I listened to his story, that I wouldn't be. In a way I hadn't wanted to answer his question because I thought I wouldn't be upset and I didn't want to distract him into paying attention to why I wouldn't rather than how he felt. But I ended up discovering how by looking at the situation the way he does, by paying attention to pieces I would have ignored but he looked at, I actually would be quite hurt. He helped me see what was hard for me was that his situation parallels one that I'm in quite a lot with a colleague of mine-one where I haven't paid attention to all the ways I really am hurt. So I guess I had a lot invested in not paying attention to that hurt (and that's a whole other topic...) --so much invested that I picked and even rationalized a way to attend to my husband that could keep me distant. You know I really try not to do that, to get wrapped up in my own ideas of how to respond without giving him some choice. But I'm a sneaky one, I'll tell you! I've got to be on my toes all the time to keep from controlling everything-him, myself, what's him, what's me- everything! I almost have to keep from letting myself get too involved with my first take on things because, whatever actual merit it may have, I'm in danger of making it into the truth. And I also have a tendency not to want to see some other whole way I'm actually operating or feeling, because I might get pulled into making that the truth. That's kind of funny; like it's not that I don't want to find out I've got a whole different take in there, too, because it'll make me leave the take i've been going with, but because I'm afraid I'll much with the new take. It's tricky. I'm lucky he's someone I can explore those kinds of things with. We really do help each other not to just take some stand that keeps us from exploring even the hard stuff.

Read this online at <https://books.byui.edu/Adult_development/meaning_making_model>