

A Brief description of the Stages of Adult Development.

Excerpted from Jennifer Garvey Berger's *Changing on the Job* (2002)

Theories of adult development offer us a new possibility to make sense of who we are and who we are becoming.

These theories tell us that our time on the planet doesn't just change our physical shape; it also changes our emotional and mental shape—what I think of as our “forms of mind.” Just as a baby becomes more able to handle the complexities of her life when she learns to walk and talk, and a young child becomes more able to handle the complexities of his life when he learns to read, so too do our new ways of being in the world shape our ability to handle the complexities in our life.

Unlike our early changes, though, our adult changes tend not to show up with new skills or a new physical growth spurt. Generally, you can see them most easily when you get really interested not just in what someone knows but in how he makes sense of what he knows. For example, early in our adult lives we rely on outside perspectives to tell us how we are doing—what is right and wrong, what is successful, what is valuable.

This outside perspective can come from a set of relationships (with your family, your friends, your colleagues at work or in a religious institution) or from a set of principles or expertise (from your training or your professional experience). In each case, the truth about us tends to come from outside us, from our social surround, which is why we call this the socialized form of mind.

This socialized form of mind has been a great help to humans throughout our history. It creates the glue in societies and helps us learn from one another and follow common rules—not because we are forced to but because in our socialized form of mind we internalize those rules as the right way to be. Here people are mostly creating and defending the identity that others give to them; we need to make other people feel good about us to feel good about ourselves.

You can see that in a simpler world, where there were guides who could tell us what was right or wrong, where professions and sets of expertise stayed fairly constant across a person's life span, there was little reason to grow beyond this form of mind. And even in the complex world people are faced with today, many people stay with the socialized form of mind for the rest of their lives.

Others, though, when faced with the confusing complexity of different opinions and pressures and professions, come to understand the limits of a view that is looking outward. Those people keep the voices they once internalized within a socialized mind, but over years or even decades of development they add a kind of “chief deciding voice” to the crowd—their own voice, that is.

We call this the self-authored form of mind because now we do not want to be written by our circumstances; we figure out how to pick up the pen to write our own story. We no longer turn outside ourselves for direction on what's right and wrong, good and bad, but bring the compass inside as we cobble together our own set of values and beliefs by which to make our own decisions. This doesn't mean that we no longer care about the opinions of others or of our society or our professions, but when those opinions clash it is not a crisis of self for us; it is a tricky set of decisions to make, but we have the self-authored form of mind to write those decisions for ourselves.

In the self-authored form of mind, the identity we protect and defend is the internal operating system we have assembled for ourselves—our values and systems of belief. This protection might cause us to slip into righteous certainty because we are more oriented to the worth of our own judgments than the ideas and perspectives of others. Eventually, this internal operating system, which was such a gift when we first developed it, can turn into a liability.

Ultimately, in an uncertain and complex world, we might find that the effort we put into protecting our beliefs and values is not worth all the calories, and that it prevents our learning and holding multiple perspectives about the world. Our beliefs and values are obviously of key importance, but they don't play out on an empty stage. They are always shaped by what is asked of us and by what our circumstances require.

This is why some people find that the complexity of the world is still too great for this self-authored mind to handle. They see that they are not the sole writers of their lives, as if their lives took place on a blank page. Instead, they see themselves as both the writer and the written. They have some control over their lives, but they do not have total control; they are jazz musicians riffing along with others rather than believing life can be rehearsed and perfected.

We call this co-constructed and emergent form of mind the self-transforming form of mind because people with this form of mind are always searching for the next thing that might challenge a deeply held belief system. They spend less time creating and defending a particular version of themselves and more time letting life transform them.

Knowing that these different mind forms exist (and sensing the many, many steps between each of these phases that incorporate multiple forms of mind simultaneously) can help us make sense of some of our inevitable challenges. Are you aware that you used to rely more on the perspectives of others and are now worried that you're becoming a little arrogant? That's likely part of a necessary developmental transition from the socialized to the self-authored form of mind. Notice that you used to feel more certain and now suddenly you see many more shades of grey—even about your own values, which you have held so dear? That's likely an emerging chapter as you develop from the self-authored to the more self-transforming form of mind. Remembering that we are always on a developmental path helps us walk into the future with more grace.

A final caveat

Many people take exception to the idea of using a hierarchical model to describe the development of adults. It is a common critique that naming differences as a function of "capacity" is limiting and potentially dangerous. Our assumption is slightly different, but that slight difference changes our perspective enormously. Instead of seeing the ways that discussions of adult capacity are limiting, we see the ways that understanding different capacities can be supportive and liberating. This is not a stagnant typology of complexity; instead, it is dynamic, and it suggests that capacity grows and changes in important ways over time.

People often ask us whether we really believe that there is not some kind of a value judgment we are making as we use a hierarchical model as a lens through which to think and talk about others. They ask us whether we feel uncomfortable about judging adults in this way. To the contrary, we think that understanding the sense another person makes of the world is the most respectful thing one person can do for another, and we believe that understanding the developmental nature of this meaning-making opens up new possibilities for conversation and support. We believe that the idea that adults develop over time (rather than simply gaining weight and losing hair) is incredibly hopeful, and we believe that the more any person knows about his or her journey, the easier the upcoming road may be.

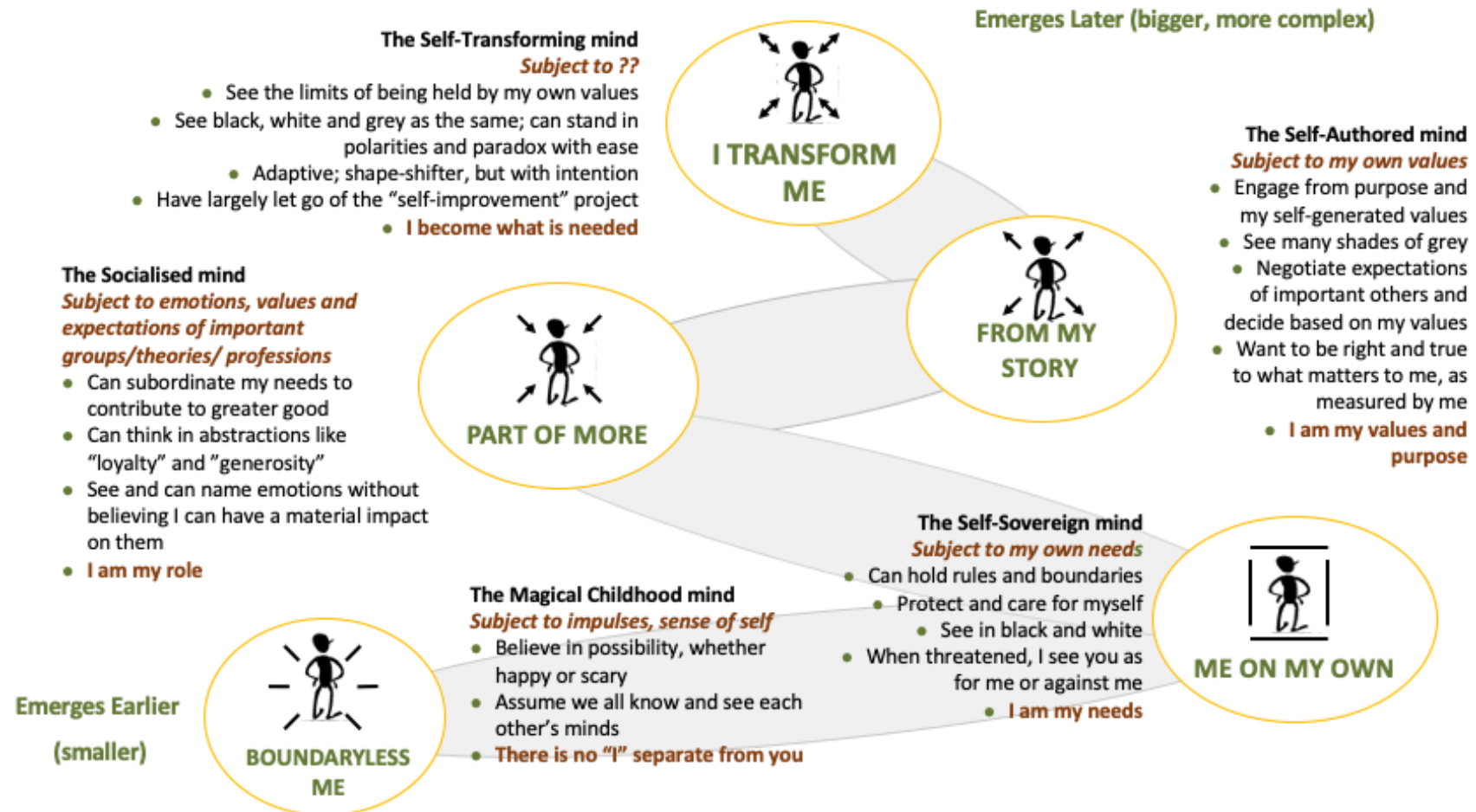
For further reading

- Garvey Berger J (2019). *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps: How to Thrive in Complexity* Stanford University Press.
- Garvey Berger J (2011). *Changing on the job: Developing Leaders for a complex world*. Stanford University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lahey, L., Souvaine, E., Kegan, R., Goodman, R., & Felix, S. (1988). *A Guide to the subject-object interview: Its administration and interpretation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Graduate School of Education, Laboratory of Human Development.

Diagram: A Map for how Adults Grow
Map Created by Fred Jones

A MAP FOR HOW ADULTS GROW

References: Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*; Garvey Berger, *Changing on the Job*



Notes