

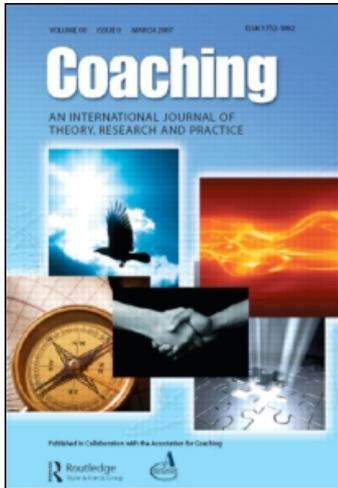
This article was downloaded by: [Berger, Jennifer Garvey]

On: 2 April 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 910154778]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t762290973>

Mapping complexity of mind: using the subject-object interview in coaching

Jennifer Garvey Berger ^a; Paul W. B. Atkins ^b

^a Initiatives in Educational Transformation, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, ^b Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Online Publication Date: 01 March 2009

To cite this Article Berger, Jennifer Garvey and Atkins, Paul W. B.(2009)'Mapping complexity of mind: using the subject-object interview in coaching',Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice,2:1,23 – 36

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17521880902780989

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17521880902780989>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Mapping complexity of mind: using the subject-object interview in coaching

Jennifer Garvey Berger^{a*}, and Paul W.B. Atkins^b

^a*Initiatives in Educational Transformation, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University. On leave in Paekakariki New Zealand;* ^b*Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*

(Received 7 November 2008; accepted 9 November 2008)

We describe a small, hypothesis-generating study of the use of a measure of complexity of mind in coaching contexts. The aims of the pilot study were threefold: (a) to explore participants', coaches' and interviewers' insights and reactions to the use of a developmental theory in coaching; (b) to develop and explore a process for using the Subject-Object Interview (SOI) inside or outside existing coaching relationships; and (c) to provide a preliminary evaluation of the usefulness and/or potential limitations of the SOI for coaching contexts. All 15 participants in this qualitative study enjoyed the process and most reported significant or profound insights arising from the process that were potentially useful for their own development. The process revealed some of the growing edges of the clients' insights into their own way of being, their relationships, and their work. Importantly, participants reported that the SOI and associated discussions allowed them to identify key developmental issues more quickly than other approaches they had experienced. While the time and high skill levels associated with conducting an SOI and feedback discussion may preclude its use in many coaching contexts, there are implications that arise from this work for coaches interested in working in developmentally-informed ways.

Keywords: adult development; assessment; listening; leadership development; questioning

Introduction

This study emerges from the frustration experienced by many coaches who help clients to a particular point but then find that even though there is still work to be done, it is much harder to help the client get beyond the plateau they have reached. This tends to be when it is not so much the behaviour of the client that is holding her back but rather the way she thinks about the world. When the situation requires not just a new set of skills, but a new set of understandings, we wondered – is there a way a conversation explicitly about adult development might help the client move forward?

Both authors have relied on adult developmental theories, among others, as important pieces of their work as university faculty, coaches, and coach educators. Jennifer's long-standing experience of measuring adult developmental complexity of mind using the Subject-Object Interview (SOI), led her to believe that perhaps this

*Corresponding author. Email: jennifer_berger@kenningassociates.com

measure could be useful in a coaching situation. It seemed clear that information about the client's complexity of mind would deepen the coach's understanding of the client and lead to new ideas for coaching conversations and interventions. We wondered, though, if making our developmental theories and measures available to the client – rather than simply using the theories in our own minds – might help promote his growth and development.

The SOI (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988) is a measure of complexity of mind that emerges from Robert Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of adult development. The theory 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 complex organisational contexts. Theories like Kegan's show that coping well with the demands of modern life is not related to any particular set of skills so much as it is 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.

This study was inspired by Jennifer's experience of conducting numerous SOIs over nearly a decade. During the SOI, the interviewer attempts as much as possible to get inside the participant's own experience of the world, particularly his characteristic ways of understanding the world and organizing his experience. In this sense, the interview deals with the most fundamental aspects of the participant's meaning making in life and frequently surfaces previously unseen aspects of his meaning making. Jennifer had found that the experience of having a SOI often took people to places they had not been before. The sense of following their own meaning making all the way to its edges gave people a sense of their own limits, a sense of questions they were not asking or connections they were not making.

These past SOIs were all conducted for research purposes, though, and were not specifically intended to be helpful, even though they were often experienced as helpful by the research participants. We began to wonder whether helping participants understand their own complexity of mind – with both a sense of the developmental trajectory and their place within it – could be useful for clients. We wondered whether showing clients 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. We hypothesised that perhaps a picture of a client's meaning-making could be a powerful thing, and if that picture were combined with strategies she might try to expand the edges of her meaning making, this picture could become a map towards a new way of seeing the world. To explore these possibilities, we decided to conduct an action research project by using the SOI in coaching contexts where real success might involve enlarging the edges of the client's meaning making system and perhaps even changing the way the client saw the world.

We set out with three related aims:

1. to explore participants' reactions to the explicit use of adult developmental theory in coaching;

2. to develop and explore a process for using the measure of complexity of mind (the SOI) as a tool in a coaching relationship; and
3. to provide a preliminary evaluation of the usefulness and/or potential limitations of the SOI for coaching contexts.

Complexity of mind

The adult developmental theory on which we most rely is Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of adult development, although our theoretical perspective is informed by other adult developmentalists (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Fischer, Yan, & Stewart, 2002; King & Kitchener, 2004; Torbert et al., 2004). We make the most use of Kegan's theory because it offers both the descriptions of the different forms of mind and also the process of movement between them. We 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 this measure tends to be enjoyable for the participant and also can, in itself, lead to some important insights. The SOI distinguishes the five central 'forms of mind' – qualitatively different ways of making meaning – as well as four sub-stages between each form. Generally, theorists agree that three of these five major forms of mind are active in the leadership ranks of most organisations. Adapting from Kegan (1994), we call these three the socialised mind (which Kegan also calls the third order), the self-authored mind (also Kegan's fourth order), and the self-transforming mind (also Kegan's fifth order).

The socialised leader is able to distance himself enough from his own perspective on the world to fully appreciate the perspectives of others and thereby value relationships for more than just self-interest. However, he may rely strongly on the external perspectives and theories he has come to trust such that it is hard or impossible for him to generate answers and ideas for himself without relying on others. The self-authored leader is able to further distance herself from her own processes such that she can recognise, understand, generate and evaluate her own standards and values for behaviour sufficiently to be fully differentiated and integrated with respect to those around her. She has an internal set of rules and regulations, a self-governing system, which she uses to make her decisions or mediate conflicts. The self-transforming leader – very rarely seen – is able to take a perspective on the dynamic, systemic and co-creative processes that give rise to his very identity, even in situations of threat. He is able to handle multiple roles and layers of complexity with relative ease.

The process of transformation is 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. 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 more explicit stance opens new possibilities and allows us to deal with greater and greater levels of complexity. This process is like taking off a pair of coloured glasses so that, instead of looking through them, we are able to look at them and thereby understand and gain control over their use: to select when we'd like to have the tint and when we'd rather be without. The most profound example of a move from implicit to explicit is when

gradually, over time, entire meaning-making systems move from being hidden to being seen. 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.

Method

This was a small, exploratory action research study. Our goal in this pilot study was to generate questions rather than prove hypotheses. We were interested in exploring the potential of this work as a helpful coaching process and also in exploring our growth along the way. Because of the small size, our findings are illustrative rather than generalisable, and our hope is that by exploring our learning to other coaches, we can generate interest in more studies that explore the connections between coaching and practice.¹

Participants

The sample included fifteen managers/senior executives from a variety of industries. These participants volunteered following a discussion of complexity of mind and its potential implications for leadership development. Participants were all aged in their 40s and 50s and had all had significant management experience. Because we were interested in the SOI process as both a stand-alone aid to development and also in the way it would be useful inside a coaching engagement, we had a mix of participants who were currently being coached and others who were not currently inside a coaching relationship. In those cases where our participants were being coached, the coach was present at the debriefing session but not the SOI.

Participant experience

Interview

Participation in the process involved two interviews: an SOI followed by a feedback discussion a few weeks later. The SOI is a semi-clinical interview. A trained and qualified interviewer sits with a participant in order to follow the train of the participant's thinking until the participant reaches the edges of his own understanding. Because the measure is investigating the *structure* of the participant's thinking rather than the *content* of his thinking, the topics are totally participant-generated, and the interview follows whatever the participant wishes to explore. The interviews were all approximately one and a half hours and all participants agreed to have their interviews recorded and transcribed.

Debrief

With a close reading and scoring of the transcript, we came to a view about the full range of sense-making represented therein. Whereas in a research interview we would have searched for the single interview score, in this developmental intervention we created a report which highlighted the broadest range of the interviewee's sense

making and offered representative quotes from inside the transcript along with generic theoretical descriptions to give a picture of each sense-making space. We also offered personalised, theoretically-based developmental activities (for example: suggestions for journal writing; particular focus questions; mindfulness activities). We used this report as talking points for a one and a half hour debrief conversation with the client (and, where applicable, with the coach as well). Because at the time of the study one researcher lived in the US and the other in Australia, and because the participants were generally living in those two countries as well, all interviews and debrief sessions took place by phone. Analysis and writing took place mostly in person, in research retreats to one country or the other.

Data collection and analysis

Because this was an action research project, we were interested in examining both the participants' experience and our own learning, and we gathered data from both the participants' perspectives and our own. In addition to transcribing the SOI, we taped the debrief sessions and selectively transcribed the post-debrief conversations with participants (about their experience and its utility). When possible, we conducted follow-up interviews several weeks after the debrief. We also kept careful track of our own learning, writing analytic memos after each interview and having regular conversations with one another to share insights and questions.

The data were analysed both by looking across the interviews for themes and also by creating maps of each participant's journey. In this way, we looked across all the participants as well as across segmented groups of participants (for example, coached versus not coached). We looked for themes that arose from the data themselves (in a more grounded, participant-driven approach) and also themes that we created using both coaching and adult development theories and experience.

Context and limitations

We knew that our deep study of adult development theories and our own experience of them would risk shifting our bias towards recognising and reporting their helpfulness. Because of our awareness of this possibility, we worked hard to bring a sceptical mind to this issue and to our questions and to make lots of room for participants to be honest about their discoveries. We shared our doubts with them and let them respond in turn. This doubt-sharing wasn't hard, in truth, because we had so many questions that were unclear in our own minds about how we thought the study might go. We also used one another to push our thinking – as we shared memos and initial lists of themes, etc.

Because Paul had worked with one of the organisations that participated in the study, there were some participants with whom Paul had a prior relationship. In order to mitigate against the impact of this, Jennifer led in those interviews and debrief sessions, often with Paul present (on the phone line).

The limitations of this study come from its small size and from the fact that while we had contact with the participants over the course of the several months of the study, this was not a longitudinal study and we cannot know the longer-term implications of this work. Thus, this is meant to be one small step along the much longer path of developmental coaching theory and practice.

Results and discussion

In this section we explore the results and implications of the study in terms of the three main aims. First we explore the insights and reactions of the participants in the context of using a hierarchical developmental theory of complexity of mind. Second we discuss our learning regarding the process of using the SOI inside or outside existing coaching relationships, and finally we present preliminary evidence regarding the usefulness and/or potential limitations of the SOI for coaching contexts.

Issues, insights and reactions

Over the course of the SOI, the participants reflected on what was most powerful for them at this time. We set this primarily in the work context, but invited participants to talk about non-work contexts as they wished. We found – as we had anticipated – that there were a wide variety of key issues the participants discussed. Some issues, however, were repeated across multiple participants. Commonly raised issues included:

- issues of competence: particularly what it means and who has it;
- questions about certainty versus ambiguity and most peoples' wish to have more of the former and less of the latter;
- fear about being an impostor, not being as good/competent as others believed;
- issues of identity, inclusion, expertise;
- difficulties saying no, engaging in conflict;
- balancing life and work in a search for a meaningful and satisfying existence; and
- hopes and worries about the future regarding growth, legacy issues, changes in passion and drive.

With those participants who were already in coaching relationships, we found that the interview often focused on key coaching issues, even though we didn't know these were the central issues beforehand (and sometimes even when the participant couldn't have articulated this connection initially). Sometimes we engaged with issues or stories the coach had not yet been able to explore.

Following both the SOI and the feedback discussion, we asked participants about their experience with this process. We were surprised – because this was a new use of this tool – that every participant had a favourable reaction to the process and that all but one participant described the process and the insights they came to as important for a variety of different reasons. More on each of these reactions below.

Some participants pointed to particular situations where they might best make use of the insights from the SOI process. For example, Bill² described the SOI and feedback as 'helpful in terms of . . . [having] a pathway for better understanding what's going on when I am a bit stressed'. He described a particular conversation regarding the meaning of 'respect' for him as particularly helpful. He found it particularly 'affirming for me of the need to continue consciously confronting and deal with issues as I see them, . . . [it was] affirming [for me] that what I was doing was constructive'.

Others commented specifically on the developmental nature of the experience as a growth tool. For example, Rene, the executive director of a complex non-profit organisation, began our debrief session by reflecting that the evening before the

session she had been drawing up her annual report for the board, with the corresponding set of goals she had for herself. She told us that the first goal that came into her head was: 'grow my brain so that I can better grasp the growing complexity of this work.' As she told this story, she laughed at that desire. 'How is the board going to make sense of that?' she asked herself. So she put away that goal, and front and centre went the goals about reaching more constituents, raising more funds, hiring more staff. In the back of her head, though, she kept the notion of growing her brain to better grasp the growing complexity of her work. When we finished our debrief of her SOI, she held the report about her complexity of mind and reminded us of her goal. 'This is what I meant! This is my brain growing!'

Stephen, who had previously been coached, drew comparisons between this SOI and debrief process and his experience in a long-term coaching relationship. He noted the ways in which examining complexity of mind seemed to accelerate the process of getting to what he considered to be 'deeper' material: 'this had a special value, . . . when I was sent the feedback [report] . . . my sense [was that] this had the power of pulling me deeper into myself, faster. We have had one real conversation and you have done some work . . . and then the conversation now. I have learned quite a lot through that process which [previously] took a long time to get to in a coaching frame. This was really valuable in a short time.'

Stephen also spontaneously compared the SOI with other pencil-and-paper type tests of personality, adult development or cognitive capability. He stated that the various psychometric tools left him 'empty' because he did not really 'believe' the results even when they fitted with his experience. He described the SOI as having 'more credibility straight away with me than those sorts of tools,' explaining that the SOI process, 'delivers real value faster and it goes deep – it certainly had me thinking and reflecting and learning things from the conversations we have had.'

One aspect of particular interest in this study was the extent to which those at earlier stages of development might feel defensive or demeaned in response to the feedback. 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.

However, our experience during this study was quite different. We were a surprised to find that it was not just learning about the most complex parts of themselves that participants welcomed and found helpful. They also found it surprisingly helpful to understand the range of their complexity of mind, to see those places where their trailing edges pull them back and to make some guesses about why that is and how it might be changed. One participant, when looking at those pieces of herself which were less complex said, 'just giving it a name makes me feel less like I'm wrong'. This appears to be consistent with evidence that 'people whose conscious conceptions of themselves [match] their nonconscious motives well – are better off emotionally' (Wilson, 2002).

None of the participants in the study whose interviews suggested a strong or predominant socialised form of mind reacted defensively or negatively towards the reports. In part this may have been because the reports were carefully structured to present both the helpful and limiting features of each form of mind. However, a more critical issue here is that the SOI process rapidly identifies and brings to awareness

real and present concerns. Participants operating from a socialised mind really are preoccupied with genuine concerns about fitting in, being liked, doing ‘the right thing’ and so on. Participants reported that having these concerns recognized and understood in terms of natural growth was a relief. Understanding different capacities can be supportive and liberating and appears to provide a useful organising narrative for helping the participant make sense of their experience (Pennebaker, Zech, & Rime, 2001).

Furthermore, developmental theories offer the hope that there might be a different way. This was particularly notable with James, the participant operating from the least complex form of mind in this study. Far from responding negatively to his feedback report, he felt very comfortable currently having the very typical socialised mind, and he was ready to walk this path toward the self-authored mind. Further James expressed hope regarding the very possibility of seeing the world differently, something that had not previously occurred to him. There was a sense of ‘I could really do that? I could *make* my own reality, my own definitions, that’s ok?’ It was as if the interview and feedback process gave James permission to grow into a space that was more satisfying and happy.

It was not our purpose to make sense of or increase our understanding of any particular place on a developmental journey. We have worked hard to develop and maintain a belief that the most important part of development is the *fit* between the person and the demands made upon her by her life and work circumstances. We were surprised, then, at how strong the connection was between self-authorship and a kind of self-esteem and confidence as a leader. In this very small study, there is some anecdotal evidence that leaders making sense of the world with a fully operating socialised mind³ experience some pain – as a result of that developmental space.

For example, Anne, a senior executive in a large international organisation, found herself caught by her own need to receive praise and encouragement – both from her managers and also from her direct reports. The somewhat mixed results of a 360-degree interview about her – which formed some of the content of the SOI – had shaken her to her foundation. She was unable to look at the results and make decisions about which ones she thought she would learn from and which ones she would disregard. Instead, she felt she needed to change everything about her leadership style, and because she felt unable to do this, could do nothing to gain traction at all. This dichotomous thinking about these options along with the extent of the disorganisation of her identity made the 360-degree interview almost unbearably painful for her: not an intervention so much as an injury.

As she gained perspective on her own reaction and began to understand potential reasons this reaction had been so strong (especially important because she was also quite self-critical about having such a strong reaction in the first place), Anne began to have a vocabulary and theory that helped her distinguish between her own perspective on the world and the perspectives of those around her, and she began to be able to hold those perspectives – and release them – at will. Her coach, who had felt quite stuck with Anne previously, said he was shocked at the changes she made following the interview and debrief process.

This is not to deny that developmental theories can be misused through inappropriate labelling and judgment. It is our experience that measurement approaches (for example: psychometric tests) that create distance between the participant and those doing the measurement are particularly susceptible to creating defensive reactions among participants. But during the SOI, the very act of measurement so completely steps inside the person's own meaning making that it sends a signal to the participants that their way of making meaning is complete and valuable. Thus participants are less likely to react defensively during the interview or the debrief session; they quickly understand that the interview is not about judging them as lacking or insufficient but more about describing to them one possible picture of their sense-making and discussing both their sense of the accuracy of that picture and also the potential implications of that picture in their lives.

The SOI also impacts on the coach and interviewers. The coaches involved in the study reported that the SOI-partnering process influenced the way they coach. As our conversations continue about their clients and this theory, they begin to see more options, and they begin to see more clients for whom this process might be helpful. We find it unexpected and interesting that this process would also be experienced by the coaches themselves as professional development.

In terms of the impacts of the process on our own experience, we have both been struck by the way in which we almost always end up liking and respecting participants at the end of a SOI, irrespective of our first impressions. When we actively and thoroughly take the perspective of another person during the interview, our subjective experience is of increased connection and understanding. We can imagine a number of mechanisms whereby this increase in positive regard towards the participant might occur. It is possible that coming to understand better the internal logic and consistency of a particular way of making sense of the world gives us insight into the intentions and hopes that underlie behaviours about which we might otherwise have negative feelings. Alternatively, we might simply be responding favourably to the openness, vulnerability and trust displayed by the participants (or, of course, both of these things could be true). Irrespective of the reason, it seems clear that active attempts to take the perspective of another can create stronger relationships of trust and positive regard between coach and client (Rogers, 1951).

The SOI will presumably not be useful for everybody: People engaged in pursuits for which their epistemological perspective is perfectly adequate may feel no need to develop more complex perspectives on themselves or their world. During this study, we were careful not to suggest that development was necessary for any of the participants. Instead we simply responded to their own self-generated desires for different perspectives on situations in their lives.

One participant, Nathaniel, indicated at the beginning of the feedback discussion that the report didn't contain a great deal that was new for him. However, by the end of the feedback discussion, he had uncovered a significant action step that he wanted to work on and he reported that he had gotten value from the process. Our sample simply didn't include anyone who didn't indicate they derived value from the procedure; therefore, we are unable to comment on the circumstances where this might occur and this also remains a question for future research. We suspect that, like traditional solution-focused coaching which is equally adaptive (Greene &

Grant, 2003), the competence of the interviewer is likely to play a significant role in the success of the approach.

Implications of this study on coaching practice

Throughout this paper, we have focused on the strengths and occasional weaknesses of using a developmental measure (specifically the SOI) and a reporting process as a coaching intervention. We know, however, that coaches reading this paper will not be able to simply buy a book about the SOI and use it with clients quickly. Learning to use the SOI in a research setting is arduous and time consuming; using it with clients takes even longer. We think that it is quite unlikely that most coaches will be interested – or able – to put in the time and energy SOI training requires. So what can coaches do to make use of these findings in their own coaching practice? We have two sets of implications for coaching practice that have arisen from this research: suggestions from our research about coaching *mindset* and suggestions about coaching *technique*. We had intuited some of these ideas before beginning this study. Over the course of our research, however, we paid close attention to the changes in our own sense-making and in the reported changes in the coaches' perspectives and made explicit our shared ideas in response to our discoveries.

Changes in mindset

We have found that simply using a developmental theory – in addition to other useful theories – can change a coach's approach. In this study we could also see how bringing a particular developmental lens could change someone's mind. We had a special window into this by virtue of Paul's ability to reflect in new ways about the participants who were known to him before this research process and watch his own changing attitude and thinking about those participants as he experienced them through his experience of the SOI and debrief. In particular, we have noted two main changes that seem to come from knowledge of developmental theories. These theories:

- increase our perspective-taking and compassion, help us be more empathetic, help us watch our own agenda-setting; and
- narrow our focus on what is possible for clients – what kind of coaching goals might be set, what can be accomplished.

It comes as a surprise to many that the use of a hierarchically developmental theory would lead to increasing the empathy and decreasing judgment, but the coaches we worked with and most people who learn to administer the SOI find that this is so. The SOI involves stepping inside the mindset of another person and understanding the world through that person's eyes. This requires laying down your own judgment about what you might do in similar circumstances, etc. It also requires laying down a problem-solving orientation – and even a helping orientation more generally. When the entire mission is to understand how someone else makes meaning, it becomes impossible to simultaneously judge the other person, because looking through her eyes means that you understand what she was doing and why. We believe that any coach can adopt this mindset – without any particular SOI techniques – during

different times in a coaching engagement. We have found that outside our use with the SOI, the technique of suspending our own judgment in order to fully understand the client's perspective is especially helpful when we find ourselves most drawn to give advice or solve problems. We take the urge to solve problems or make suggestions as a marker of our need to enquire more deeply into the way the client makes sense of her situation. Once we fully understand her meaning making about the situation, we can either offer advice and guidance (or not) from a much more client-centred position.

We have also found that the use of developmental theories helped us, and the coaches with whom we worked, more quickly understand the potential and limits of a coaching engagement. We were able to more thoughtfully draw our attention to where client skills needed to be built and to differentiate these from areas where clients may have needed to come to new perspectives in the world. We were able to focus on the possibility that our hope for our client is developmentally over his head, and reshape our hopes (and our homework) in order to make it more possible that the client would find success. For example, often one of us deals with a client who has difficulty making his own decisions in the face of conflicting perspectives of people in his life. By looking through a developmental lens, we can keep alive the two options that it is possible the client needs better skills in decision making, or that our client is coming from a socialised mind and needs more scaffolding to begin to take on responsibility for his own opinions.

Changes in techniques

We have also learnt that there are techniques that emerge from using the SOI that other coaches who do not know the SOI could also use. These techniques lead us to:

- think about our practice in new ways;
- ask different kinds of questions, and ask them in different ways; and
- listen differently.

We have come to think about our practice differently through this experience of using developmental theory explicitly with clients, because these theories focus and shape our understanding of our real job. These developmental theories suggest that the developmental rhythm is about moving things from a place where they're invisible (subject) to a place where they can be seen and acted upon (object). We have since used this as a guiding principle for many of our coaching conversations, and we constantly seek to help our clients see those things in themselves and their work contexts, which would otherwise be invisible to them. This may sound obvious, but for us, when we see a client stuck in one way or another, asking ourselves 'what does this client not see?' (or 'what do I not see?') is quite helpful.

We have also found that the SOI process helps us shift the kind of questions we ask our clients. Rather than always asking questions about the story or context of the issue on the table, we are more likely – even outside an SOI – to ask about the meaning the client is making of these issues. Rather than asking 'why' questions (for example: 'why did you make that decision rather than another?') we ask 'how'

questions (for example: ‘how do you make sense of your difficulty with that decision?’).

Even when we use similar questions, we are more likely to listen to the answers in different ways – trying to understand the way the client makes sense of the world, what assumptions about the world underlie her actions. We make a point of helping our clients name their assumptions so that we can get the underlying structure of their actions and see the patterns in seemingly disparate events. Then, by illuminating those patterns and making them explicit for our clients, we are more likely to be able to help our clients change the way they see themselves and their world rather than focusing on any particular goal or interaction (although of course sometimes we do this too).

Conclusion

We began this study wondering whether we would find a way to help clients by using a hierarchical developmental measure in a way that they would find useful and opening, and not simply judging. We discovered that the process did not just change the clients’ experience and sense of what was possible for them. It also changed our experience as coaches, and changed the experience of the coaches with whom we worked. Even a theory that looks hierarchical, when used carefully and with a mindset that is oriented toward the journey and not towards the hierarchy, can help clients chart their own path to richer and deeper perspectives on themselves and their social world.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported in part by a faculty grant awarded by ANU College of Business and Economics and in part by a faculty grant awarded by George Mason University College of Education and Human Development. Our thanks to the peer reviewers and editor of this journal for making careful and truly helpful comments that improved the quality of our thinking and writing.

Notes

1. We are pleased to say that we too are engaged in this deeper exploration. Paul is now a co-principal investigator on a very large study that explores the connections between coaching and growth of perspective-taking capacity using the SOI and other measures. Jennifer is a developmental consultant on that study.
2. All names of participants have been changed.
3. The SOI distinguishes among four sub-stage places between each of the major forms of mind described in this paper. In the transition from one to the next, there is a time when there is a hint of the growing form of mind in addition to a fully-formed present form of mind. Then both minds are fully present at the same time, with the former form of mind having an edge. In the next stage, while both minds exist together, the growing form of mind has the edge. Finally, the trailing edge recedes and becomes merely a hint of what used to be. This means that in the transition from one form of mind to the next, there are long stretches of time when the trailing mind operates alongside the growing mind.

Notes on contributors



Dr Jennifer Garvey Berger is an associate professor at George Mason University (on leave) and a partner with Kenning Associates, a small leadership development consultancy. A writer and editor (she is co-editor of *Executive coaching: Practices and perspectives*, among others), Jennifer holds a masters degree and a doctorate from Harvard University where she was mentored by Robert Kegan. Jennifer has moved to New Zealand where she supports leaders with her coaching and teaching and also walks on the beach each day, a transformation she highly recommends to others.



Dr Paul Atkins is an associate professor in leadership and organisational behaviour at the Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University. In addition to his teaching and research in mindfulness, leadership, thinking and organisational behaviour, he regularly conducts leadership development workshop and executive coaching focused on communication, influencing, creativity and resilience. He is a registered organisational psychologist and holds a Masters degree in cognitive science and a PhD in psychology from Cambridge University.

References

- 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., & King, P.M. (2004). *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- 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.
- Greene, J., & Grant, A.M. (2003). *Solution-focused coaching*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- 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.
- Pennebaker, J.W., Zech, W.E., & Rime, B. (2001). Disclosing and sharing emotion: Psychological, social and health consequences. In M.S. Stroebe, R.O. Hansson, W. Stroebe

- & H. Schut (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research: Consequences, coping, and care*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- 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.
- Wilson, T.D. (2002). *Strangers to ourselves: Discovering the adaptive unconscious*. MA, US: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press.