

Kegan's Subject-Object Theory

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Kegan introduced his version of the constructive developmental theory which extended the style of Piaget's stages for development into adulthood as the Subject-Object theory. "Object" in this instance, are things that people could reflect on, handle, look at, take control of, or be responsible for. Things that are "subject" can be identified with, tied on, fused with, or embedded in. Unlike Piaget, only the childhood stages are associated with age. Once becoming an adult, the person transitions from stage to stage at his own pace and may not necessarily reach all stages. Kegan's theory gives more assistance or insight to counselors and teachers of what can be done in order to promote development from stage to stage. In addition to naming and giving characteristics of individuals during the stages, Kegan gives support and challenges in facilitating the transition between the stages.

In this theory, there are 6 stages that a human may progress through as they develop. These stages are the incorporative, impulsive, imperial, interpersonal, institutional, and interindividual stages. During the incorporative phase, which occurs from infancy to 2 years of age, the child is characterized by his dependency upon his caretaker and awareness of his immediate needs while being unaware of the needs of others. The next stage is the impulsive stage, during which a child has a short attention span and impulsiveness. While occurring between ages 2 and 7, the child's short attention span in relation to the needs of the others is similar to the lack of awareness of others during the incorporative phase. Next, would be the imperial stage which occurs from ages 8 -11 and sometimes above. This stage is characterized by a child being more self sufficient and leaning towards the formation of "peer gangs" that help with socialization. They are interested in others because of how they can be benefitted themselves. Some individuals find it difficult to transition from the imperial stage to interpersonal and in doing so, find it difficult to be fiscally responsible (in terms of debt), or even responsible enough to work at a demanding job for lengthy periods. They are more thrill seeking individuals and are unable to adhere to the mental demands of society. During the interpersonal stage, individuals enter adulthood as good, productive, citizens with the need for approval and a habit of adapting values from their families (doing things as they've always been done). These individuals have difficulty setting clear limits. The institutional stage is a productive citizen that is now able to set clear limits and weigh their choices among values or ideologies. They are able to see their relationship to the whole or within society. Very few reach

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the final stage, which is the interindividual stage. In most cases, adults age 40 and up are moving towards individualism. These individuals are able to reflect more on their lives and experiences (or lack of) with others. They go through a "philosophical crisis".

As a third grade teacher, most of my students are in the imperial phase; however there are a few each year that still fall within the impulsive category. In order to match these students, I must offer incentives for students that model appropriate behavior. I do so with our behavior chart, while referring to it in order to ensure that positive behavior is recognized. When behavioral issues arise with some students, I must also discuss the need for the student to be able to work well with others and maintain those relationships. For example, I could ask a student that mistreats his classmates if he believes that people want to be around people that treat them badly. I would appeal to his need for wanting the acceptance of his peers. Out of the twenty to twenty-two students that enter my classroom yearly, there is always at least 1 student that has a short attention span and finds it difficult to sit still. Later on, after speaking with the parents, I find out that they were allowed to start school early, and lack the maturity at the beginning of the year to join their imperialist classmates. Interestingly enough, Kegan states that during the imperial stage, learners become more self sufficient. This is a very accurate and interesting statement in regards to my teaching style because I expect my third graders to be self sufficient. So, when I get the impulsive child, it is difficult to transform them to the imperialist stage because they've grown so accustomed to their behavior being acceptable. The revelation that parents who have not grown beyond the interpersonal stage have difficulty setting clear limits was very indicative of this scenario as well. Most of my parents are in this phase, so we struggle in the beginning of the year because they sometimes don't see the necessity of the limits being set in the classroom or the ideology behind it. Also, within the imperialistic stage, my students, especially the girls, begin forming clicks, where they pick up each other's habits. They also begin to pay attention to the methods by which they are grouped in class and learn well from this socialization. Reading this article was useful in the aspect of having a document that justified the behaviors of most of my students while giving me insight on the parents as well.

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References

- Eriksen, K. (2008). Robert Kegan's Subject-Object Theory of Development. In K. L. Kraus (Ed.), *Lenses: Applying lifespan development theories in counseling* (p. 120-136). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.