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A Conversation with Susanne Cook-Greuter

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RV: Your work has been very much based on the research of Loevinger and you've expanded her model. Would you talk just a little bit about that expansion?

SCG: When I discovered Loevinger's instrument I was so excited, because it combined my interest in language with psychological theory about adult development. By looking at how people express themselves you can predict to some degree what kind of worldview they are most likely using. After I learned how to score the Loevinger instrument in 1979, very soon I got protocols that were from the high end, second tier of development. Loevinger's theory and her measurement just weren't clear enough. It didn't differentiate between the stages in the sense that I felt one could. I initially just said, "Well let's see what I can find." I just started collecting data, more and more data. You can have intuitions about things, but unless you have empirical data, a lot of data, it's not yet science.

RV: Then it seemed there were people who were falling outside the boundaries on the high end of her scale?

SCG: Yes. Or simply that the distinctions she made weren't enough. I felt that there could be finer distinctions that really would be important to describe that territory. Her model stops at the integrated stage as a sort of catchall for self-actualizers and above. I felt compelled to search because there has been a personal intrigue about the higher end for me.

RV: And the category that you came up with beyond Loevinger's model?

SCG: It is one that focuses on becoming aware of one's own meaning making. It is above yellow, above Keegan's stage five where I felt there needed to be more clear distinctions. I started in 1979 to collect data. By 1985 I had a vague theory.

I had been discouraged certainly by Loevinger, herself, to even try that kind of approach. She simply said you can't do it -- nobody can -- and if you believe you can you must be suffering from hubris [laughter]. All of us exploring the mature end of development have to ask those questions of ourselves: Is that really what I am doing here? Am I really falling into that category? Am I taking on things that I am not qualified to look at? Who determines that? Her injunction caused quite a quandary for me for a while.

RV: What are the stages that you have focused on?

SCG: Beyond the Autonomous stage is my focus. The ideal of this stage would be somebody who really knows himself very well, knows the patterns of development and meaning making of other people; a person who is tolerant; a person who could look at multiple systems and compare them, somebody who is very accomplished in some ways compared to most of society.

For the Autonomous stage, we're talking here about maybe 6-8% of the population. They tend to be consultants or people who are interested in that sort of relationship to others. They are interested in helping others grow. That is really one of their chief characteristics. After reading thousands of protocols, Autonomous individuals, or Strategists to use Torbert's term, also give the impression of ego attachment in the sense of wanting to present a really coherent, caring and complex self. It's all driven from the ego; it's all driven from "Look how well I do these things." Unlike earlier stages, they don't hide conflict necessarily any more, they may show the shadow sides of themselves.

RV: So subsequent stages are about ego detachment?

SCG: Yes. More and more so. Ego-deconstruction starts with the post-conventional stages. During conventional development from birth to stage four or the Achiever stage, the independent, separate self gets constructed. Stage four is the western ideal of what an adult should be: an independent, self-governing agent who makes rational decisions. That is still what we are trying to get the people to become through our education systems. However, the experience of separateness also constitutes a major illusion in that we are totally interdependent with other people and the environment.

Then somebody who knows who they are starts to question the self-identity with clear boundaries that they have constructed. It is with the Individualist stage that questioning of assumption starts: Who said so; why do I think the way I think about this? The questioning starts the deconstruction of what one believes. The doors of perception open and disillusionment takes place. The first step is just to sort of become aware of the culturally imbibed stuff. The second step of deconstruction was what my research was about. It involves becoming aware of the fundamental way we make meaning in our own lives and how our constructions really profoundly affect how we experience life.

RV: This is where the awareness of language comes in?

SCG: Yes. I think language awareness is a major distinguisher among different theories. There are theories that offer a whole spectrum of development of the self from birth to mature adulthood and there are theories that focus merely on cognitive capacity in manipulating abstract symbols. The latter often do not acknowledge the limits of symbolic representation that they themselves are bound by. If a theory doesn't acknowledge that, it is limited to the personal rational realm and does not represent an understanding of human meaning making.

RV: What's the next stage?

SCG: Ahh, the next stage! This theoretical dilemma always makes me laugh. All researchers get to an area where it's their own cognitive or developmental edge. Whatever comes after that gets put into their highest finally hypothesized stage. I critiqued Loevinger's last stage, the Integrated, for just being sort of a collection, Sammelsurium of various ill-defined things. The irony is that this is the case for my last stage as well. Researchers can push a little bit beyond the limit of their own capacity. But then the last stage in a theory is usually a projection of what one intuits about that stage or what one would like to be at oneself.

RV: When we're in a stage ourselves and we're looking upward, we're going to define anything up there in terms of the stage we're in, is that correct?

SCG: That's one way of looking at it. Even if we have really good intuitions, we can't necessarily measure them. Using a sentence completion test totally limits one from assessing anything beyond language. There would have to be a different approach and instrument in order to make differentiation beyond the personal level.

RV: That suggests a question that one of the readers of ILR raised. Have there been any studies that you're aware of that compare results from your approach, the Leadership Development Profile, with Kegan's and others' instruments that have been developed to look at stage development of individuals?

SCG: Not much. Only from my own study of the measures. You know Kegan was one of my teachers, so I had a good experience, good thorough knowledge of his approach. Most current adult development theories tend to stop around the second tier and are limited to the personal, rational domain.

RV: I don't mean just in terms of the stage model, but in the use of the assessments, how people come out on the different assessments.

SCG: Depending on how the assessment is done it comes out differently. SD uses a multiple-choice test that is fairly

transparent. The values test is just too simple. People who have read enough and think of themselves as yellow can come out yellow or higher. Given that we know which responses would be desirable, we can choose those at the level of espoused values. I've found that test to be the least appealing aspect of the whole wonderful SD system.

RV: Isn't there an approach used for Keegan's stages as well?

SCG: Yes, and that one is beautiful in another way. It gives rich qualitative data. It's an interview measure.

RV: It's the subject/object interview?

SCG: Yes. It is very time consuming. One of the issues that I'm concerned about there is that the developmental level of the interviewer could cause bias in what he or she controls. If the interviewer is less developed than the interviewee, you know they cannot bring out easily what is beyond their own purview, their own field of vision. Things simply cannot appear on their radar. That we cannot understand or even register distinctions several levels above our own is a basic tenet of developmental theory.

RV: Have you done any comparisons between LDP results and subject/object interview results?

SCG: We have only individual cases where that was done. With a good interviewer and because the S/O interview is probed, it might come out a little higher than it would on the LDP. The LDP is not probed. People really project their own view of what they're doing on the test.

RV: Yes, I know, from experience.

SCG: One can always say in a projected test, if the person chooses whatever they choose to do with the test, this is part of their behavior. In that sense, it reflects something that's probably real about them.

RV: That's the part I don't want to own. [Laughter] What was

going on for me when I did it was that I have a bias towards these kinds of tests and my bias is that they're never going to tell you the truth about you. They're only going to tell you about how your responses correspond to somebody's model. I tend to take tests rather quickly. I did that with LDP and, as a consequence, my answers tended to be rather brief. I didn't really respond to the questions as fully as I might have.

SCG: But it's an interesting choice you made that does reflect your stated bias.

RV: Yes, it is.

SCG: And that's the point that I would then say is worth looking at. Where is that sort of bias or preference coming from? See, whatever one does with a projective test, does seem to show something about one's way of life.

RV: Yes, well it sure did that.

SCG: And I would always also say for any of these measures, when they're being taken by people who are specialists in the field, that in itself is an absolutely confounding factor. If you know too much about any measure there is the likelihood that it's not a good representation of you, whatever comes out.

RV: Did Loevinger ever have an opportunity to see any of the results of the research that you were doing?

SCG: She had opportunities, but she...it's almost a funny story. Perhaps I can tell it. Shortly after I sent her my dissertation proposal we celebrated her 80th birthday in 1998. They organized a conference in her honor and I attended. I asked her, "Did you get a chance to look at my proposal?" She just sort of glanced at me and said, "Yeah, I took it with me when I had to go to the dentist for some root canal work." I just thought this was so symptomatic for our relationship. [Laughter]

She just really had doubts about anybody being able to say

anything beyond her model. Another indicator is that in the new manual that came out in 1996—Hy and Loevinger worked 10 years on that new manual -- they actually gave many fewer examples for their highest stage than they had in the original version. They said that for all practical purposes the integrated stage could not be measured.

RV: You feel you've come up with a method and criteria to measure beyond the Autonomous stage and you've demonstrated this in your dissertation, *Postautonomous Ego Development: Its Nature and Measurement*, that was published in 1999.

SCG: That was really the whole intent. Many people have theories, but do they have the empirical evidence to actually test whether their conjectures make sense? To check whether others come up with the same interpretation as yours is what part of what validity testing is about. Does your interpretation of the data make sense to others or does it just reflect your own idiosyncratic view?

RV: At the heart of all of this is the question of adult development and learning. The constructivists' developmental approach that you're taking has different points of view on the question of how does one develop across stages, how does one learn and evolve over time. Where do you stand on that?

SCG: In the early stages development seems to be maturational. All children seem to go through pretty much the same stages that almost all developmental theorists call the pre-conventional stages and early conventional stages.

RV: An affirmation of Piaget's work, then?

SCG: Yes, exactly. The adult development field proper really started when Michael Commons and other researchers began to document adult ways of thinking that went beyond what Piaget had postulated. It turned out that Piaget's formal operations, which is reached by early adulthood, is not the most complex way of how adults make meaning. We now believe that development in terms of increasing complexity

and integration can continue throughout the lifespan. But there is still some debate about that. Are the higher stages simply more complex forms of formal operations or are they fundamentally different? That's the ongoing debate.

RV: Well, it's a critical debate when it comes to questions of how do we bring this knowledge and this perspective to bear on working with people and organizations, particularly for the area of my interest in leadership. I know you're working with Bill Torbert and Harthill. What is your perspective on applying your work to the notion of leadership in business and organizations, communities, etc.

SCG: I'm always one of the few that insists that we don't overvalue what I call vertical development or transformation by helping people get to higher stages vs. just helping them to become more fully at home where they currently are (horizontal growth). In general, we know from data that for leading organizations or for transformational leadership, postconventional development is an advantage. Only with postconventional development do you have a sense of the whole spiral. I think spiral dynamics makes the point very well that unless you can do that, unless you recognize the value and contribution as well as the limits of each prior level, you can't really tailor your leadership approach to others. You can't really appreciate what others bring to the table and how necessary all perspectives are to a viable organization.

Talking SD language, if you are orange, you will only see what's wrong with blue. It is very hard for any of the conventional stages to see what the others have to offer. Only at yellow or at the Autonomous or Strategist's stage do you have that inclusive awareness in the sense of an awareness of your own development or evolution as a part of how the world works and therefore an appreciation of where others are on the trajectory.

RV: Do you think that can be taught?

SCG: I think supportive environments and mentoring can help people get there, but you can't force it. No amount of

training will get somebody there who has no inner readiness for it, or the cognitive capacity to go further. Here I get into an interesting dilemma for myself because my spiritual path has certain esoteric explanations of why this is so. And yet I don't want to use that kind of explanation when I'm doing theory with empirical data. I want to see from the data itself just what kinds of explanation come forth. It does make sense to me that not all people are predestined to reach the later stages.

RV: Reaching a higher stage or not, what about those who are still first tier and looking down? Can we develop oranges and greens to begin to appreciate the reds and blues and so forth?

SCG: We certainly can try. Any approach that compares different styles of how people act may help. If you look at trait theory as in Myers Briggs, people can learn to identify with this type or that type and understand other people as very different types from themselves. How can we use this information to get along better with each other or to solve conflicts? Knowing who the other person is does help me to understand and to approach them in a way that's more productive. Otherwise, I just simply state they're wrong or they're benighted. How come they don't see the world the way I see it? That encouragement to learn about differences can sometimes help make things go more smoothly.

RV: You are supporting the notion that one of the things we need to do is develop the healthier aspects of the earlier stages in our systems, even within ourselves. Whether we're orange or green or yellow we can still have access or we are still influenced by the dynamics of those earlier stages. We need to nurture them in a way that has them shift, becoming constructive processes in our work, in the way we do ourselves in the world. Is that a fair statement?

SCG: I think this is an excellent statement and the focus I tend to put on that when I explain to students or when we work with this material is it's a matter of choice. If you are only red, or only an Opportunist, you really have absolutely no capacity to see anything else. If you're a Diplomat, a real Diplomat, then you have no choice about that behavior.

That's just the way you are. That's all you can see. However, if you are at a stage beyond Diplomat, Diplomat responses are part of you and you may have a choice in how to integrate them and how to use them when functional. The amount of choice available is one of the major ways stages differentiate from each other. The higher the stage, the more interpretive and behavioral choices you have.

RV: Let's look at the question of lines, the question of whether or not development is all apace, if you will, in the physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive and other lines of development. Do you see us as potentially at different stages for different aspects (lines) of our being or do we tend to cluster all lines at one stage?

SCG: Another one of the basic controversies. [Laughter] William James was the first to talk about the "center of gravity" of our meaning making and if you look at the self as the unit that integrates all the other lines, then I would say we expect some coherence. If you look at separate lines such as the cognitive or the moral, then I think that if you measured one first and then measured the other there could be real obvious discrepancies. We also generally believe that certain levels of moral development simply are not possible unless you have the cognitive capacity. The cognitive in that way drives a lot of other stuff. I would say you could be cognitively highly evolved and capable of making sophisticated distinctions in a specific arena and applying your sort of smarts to complex problems, but that doesn't mean you are a highly evolved and integrated as a person. I have actually observed this on the SCT often enough to have many questions around it.

RV: Then in the case of development as an intervention, especially if we're going to talk about leadership development, do you see a strategy, a way of approaching that in business organizations or other contexts? Do you have a methodology that you are leaning towards?

SCG: I wouldn't call it a methodology. It is not that well developed. But I tend to think that the best approach is to start with teaching or helping people to become familiar with certain skills rather than talking about theory and stages.

Skills like listening skills and the kind of skills that are described in 'Emotional Intelligence'. There are many ways you can help people become alert to some of the differences that are important. Skills like action inquiry and self-reflection can be practiced.

For instance, self-reflection is hard for anybody at the conventional level of development, even Achievers find it hard to deeply self-reflect. Whereas at the post-conventional stages self-reflection becomes just part of who you are. You can't help but to self-reflect. But to teach that, to encourage more people to self-reflect is to give them means, like have them journal about their experiences, do yoga, or teach them other ways of paying attention to themselves that are different from their regular way of operating or running on automatic pilot. These new practices can then get people to a new place or awareness.

I wouldn't introduce developmental theory very early on or I may not introduce it at all. But I would try to get people to start to do little mild meditative things. Try, for example, to introduce a few minutes of silence at the beginning of a meeting and observe how that can change the attention of those present. There are other known ways of how meetings can be done differently than usual. A lot of suggestions and material you can find in Senge for instance, in his Field Book. There is a lot out there that can be done. These approaches help people to shift from their ordinary, unconscious approaches for holding meetings to a different kind of meeting, even just a tiny bit different so that there's a new expectation.

RV: Is it possible that human systems of organization really emerge from one of the levels, or actually are an accumulation of emergence from different levels as they've developed over time, and that at some point the whole notion of organization, perhaps even the whole notion of business and exchange are transcended so that if you do develop to some point you can no longer authentically participate in some fashion?

SCG: I think it's not that you can't participate authentically

but again the choice here is another one as when Tolbert talks about Magicians. My sense is that Magicians tend not to be ongoing participants in one organization. They're more the types that would come in from their own free will because they feel they have something unique to contribute or else they are called in as Magicians to do something that the organization on its own capacity cannot do.

It's one thing that I'm sometimes optimistic about and sometimes not. How can we get the whole culture to move to a more diverse, less self-righteous, less rigid perception of things? I imagine a more global society -- one where being a global citizen would be the norm. That is a way of looking at oneself as part of humanity rather than seeing oneself as part of a particular group, race, culture, organization or nation. That's sort of the ideal, the dream many of us have or we wouldn't do this kind of work. But there's also the fact that Western culture is still mostly embedded in the conventional realm. That creates a ceiling or a limit that can be self-reinforcing.

RV: In other words our own personal constructs tend to act as limits or ceilings on our development, on our capacity, on our ability to engage with greater complexity. The same is true of social systems.

SCG: Yes. Social systems are in some ways even more resistant to change, more tending towards the lower common denominator. It's even harder to shift because you have all the people who are really attached to a way of work and life, which may be the only one they know. This accounts for most things in politics. If there's a majority of people who know only their own culture and ideology, then you can imagine how difficult it is to open their minds to other possibilities. Here again I appreciate the beautiful contribution of spiral dynamics that makes life circumstances such an important aspect of how we explain all of this. The tendency to go back, to revert to an earlier stage, to simplify things under stress is common not only in individuals, but in systems too.

RV: I hear a rumor that you're in the process of writing a book. Is this true?

SCG: A rumor?. It is a very difficult process. It's almost to years now since we had a meeting at Ken Wilber's with about 8-10 people trying to get together to write an introductory book about integral leadership. We envision a book that is practical and that would translate complex theories into words that could be read and understood widely without losing the necessary complexity and integrity. Anybody who writes knows that this is one of the most difficult things to do. At what point when you simplify are you actually falsifying what you're meaning? It's just a problem anybody who writes about science knows only too well. And it's a wonderful, wonderful achievement for those few who actually have been able to achieve a popular scientific style.

RV: So I'm unclear by your response whether or not that is really an active project.

SCG: It's an active project. I met last December with John Foreman, the other head writer on the project in Seattle. We really hammered out one chapter and created the whole outline that we think will work for the book. We have a serious beginning and the question is always, since this is voluntary work, when can we carve out some extra time to work on it? But yes, we're going ahead with writing and when we get next together we will make a proposal to the rest of the group and they will help us edit, add ideas, change things.

RV: I've noticed, when I look at what people are doing around training programs and work around integral leadership, it seems to me that the emphasis is principally on the individual. There is the use of assessments and interventions that are very individually oriented. Is that what you're seeing as well?

SCG: I do because it seems unless the individuals in a system have the capacity then really the whole system cannot move forward. On the other hand, one can say that if you create a particular context for the system then the growth of individual can be supported. This is so often not the case now. Postconventional development is simply not

supported in most institutions. A collaborative inquiry organization is very, very rare to be found. There are attempts at creating this type of second tier organization, but it's difficult to sustain them. My hunch is, yes, if we have more people at later stages, then it will also be easier to sustain such organizations.

RV: Can you tell me what integral leadership is?

SCG: [Pause – Laughter] Wonderful question! I have some sense of what I understand it to be. It is leadership that is deeply aware of complexities. It can translate what the agreed upon goals are in such a way that it can appeal to different levels. It offers multiple stories, if you will, about the same goals. Gifted leaders translate what needs to be done into stories that appeal to different people so that, at the end, they can actively engage everybody to take leadership. And again, that is easier said than done and needs a flexible understanding and a dynamic response.

RV: So by definition integral leadership is second tier?

SCG: I think so. I do realize that integral has become a catchword as it's being used. You could also say that integral refers to the four quadrants, and then it doesn't necessarily mean second tier. When you teach people at any level to take the four quadrants into account for whatever problem or conflict they're looking at that's another way of defining integral.

RV: What I'm learning from our conversation is we can work with the four quadrants but we can't do AQAL because people at earlier levels or stages such as orange and green, are not going to even be able to see the potential of the second tier.

SCG: That's right. But it's still better to have the four quadrants. If you solve a gnarly problem, address a personal conflict or an organizational impasse, if you could look at the four quadrants and how they influence what's going on, you're better off than if you don't, than if you only look at one or the other contributing factor. Partial analysis is so much what has been done in the past. Even systems theory

may only look at the system and not at the individual behavior, not the internal aspect of what is happening. You have models and structures you try to put your own organization into, but I don't think that is enough. Deeper insight and better solutions can be found if you have insight into what is happening in the other quadrants as well and how things are intertwined.

RV: So in a sense Senge's work is integral in that in the Fifth Discipline and his subsequent work he attends to both the individual and the system. He addresses the individual in relation to mental models and development through Robert Fritz's work.

SCG: Senge himself is integral, but I think a lot of people have taken the structural, external stuff from him. They just diagram an organization for the cycles that work or don't work. If you only use templates for instance or diagnose "root causes" then you have not fully used what is being offered in Senge's model. That is quite often where systems theory approaches end up.

RV: Are you talking about the system archetypes?

SCG: Yes.

RV: I recently had called to my attention the fact that Ken Wilber has been going through some significant health problems and he seems to be dealing with them with a quality of strength that is really impressive. Is he actively involved in questions of integral leadership at this point?

SCG: My sense from what he has been sending to the Integral Institute members is that he's really focusing on writing out all the things that seem to have been coming through him, very rapidly and in amazing amounts through these last few months of suffering and illness. The new ideas are just so prolific and exciting. He's just trying to keep up writing them down as much as he can and focusing on that. He is absolutely fantastic. I can't wait to get more segments of the Kosmos trilogy. I really have found his latest writing to be a whole new and exciting integration, different from

before, even richer, even deeper, even more differentiated and clear.

RV: Where do you see the work of the Integral Institute, particularly the group that's working on integral leadership, going from here?

SCG: Trying to write. There are two core groups that are writing books. All of the branches are trying to get the integral ideas more into the mainstream. This is really one of the functions we have. We are really trying to overcome the quite enormous hurdles of doing that, with the humility it takes to do it as well.

RV: Who is working with you?

SCG: John Foreman, Steve March, and Paul Landraitis, are in our group. Also, David Johnson who works with city boards and multiple constituents to change attitudes so that they want to construct environmentally sound cities by creating the necessary policies. Steve McIntosh, the owner and creative director of Zen & Now is on that book project as well. He makes these wonderful Zen clocks, and has an incredible aesthetic sense. His is really the most sophisticated and fine-tuned entrepreneur I have seen in a long time.

RV: Well, is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think would be important for us to include here?

SCG: There's so much.

RV: I know.

SCG: I mean the whole thing about language that's dear to me we haven't addressed. I would also like to do some research that includes comparative measures. You alluded to that earlier; there isn't really much that compares the different measures with each other and that would be interesting.

RV: I hope you get a chance to do that. And where do you go

from here, I mean, what's in the future for Susanne?


SCG: Susanne wished she had an academic position and some dedicated graduate students that could work with all the data she has collected over the years and do some interesting things with them that she just doesn't have time for. And I'd love to teach more than I do. Currently, I'm the body at Harthill USA and the company just requires so much administrative attention that I really find myself short on time for doing what I wish to be doing instead: research, creating teaching materials, leading professional workshops, writing the integral leadership book, and more time for just reflecting and sharing ideas.

RV: Suzanne, I know all wish you well in your fulfilling those possibilities.

SCG: Thank you.

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