

A Mini-Course in Spiral Dynamics (r)



People think in different ways. A brother and sister, husband and wife, manager and employee, corporation and client company might have very different world views and values. People in adjoining cubicles or families living right next door to each other sometimes don't seem to be inhabiting the same neighborhood. Colleagues in an organization have wide ranging ideas about vision, mission, and purpose. Countries sharing one planet often seem to be in totally different worlds with their policies. Why?

Spiral Dynamics® is a way of thinking about these complexities of human existence and bringing some order and predictability to the apparent chaos of human affairs. It provides a **framework** for tracking the evolution of worldviews and a **scaffold** on which to stand while analyzing situations and planning the most appropriate

actions. It is not a set of categories or types, but a representation of the emerging flow of human thinking and value systems that ebb and flow, mix and match, in the process of living and being in this world.

Based in the original research and theory of [Dr. Clare W. Graves](#), this point of view describes how waves of consciousness emerge and flow through individuals and groups. It describes **bio-psycho-social systems** along a continuum that form an expanding spiral. Some add "-spiritual" to the end of the bio-psycho-social-spiritual string. That is sometimes useful as a reminder, but a focus on the "inner subjective world" is an essential element of Graves' odd-numbered, warm [color-coded](#) levels - AN, CP, ER, and A'N', etc.; the cool-colored layers - BO, DQ, FS, B'O', etc. - focus on the "external world." (To access two elegant quotes from Dr. Graves synthesizing his perspective, [click here](#) for an Adobe Acrobat page. For a summary of the Emergent, Cyclical, Double-Helix Model of Adult BioPsychoSocial Systems Development from *The Futurist*, 1974, [click here](#).)

What people in each world seek out in life . . . (Goals of "Successful" Living)

- 1 **BEIGE (A-N)** survival; biogenic needs satisfaction; reproduction; satisfy instinctive urges
- 2 **PURPLE (B-O)** placate spirit realm; honor ancestors; protection from harm; family bonds
- 3 **RED (C-P)** power/action; asserting self to dominate others; control; sensory pleasure
- 4 **BLUE (D-Q)** stability/order; obedience to earn reward later; meaning; purpose; certainty
- 5 **ORANGE (E-R)** opportunity/success; competing to achieve results; influence; autonomy
- 6 **GREEN (F-S)** harmony/love; joining together for mutual growth; consciousness; belonging
- 7 **YELLOW (G-T)** independence/self-worth; fitting a living system; knowing; good questions
- 8 **TURQUOISE (H-U)** global community/life force; survival of life on Earth; adapt to realities

The basic landmarks are designated by the **colors** in the spiral diagram -- beige, purple, red, blue, orange, green, yellow, turquoise, coral, and others to come. There are sub-systems between each pair where the thinking represented by the colors blend together. For example, many business people are in the



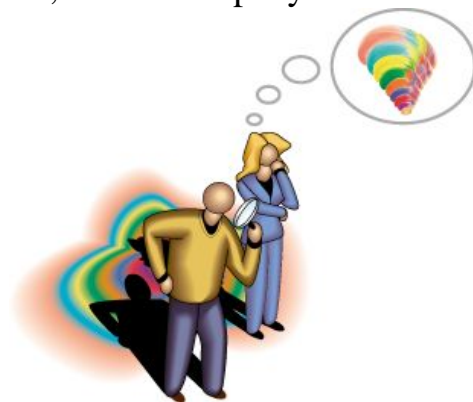
Orange-to-Green transition seeking a return to more community and spirit in their lives. A number of politicians are in the Blue-to-Orange range trying to move from structured bureaucracy to entrepreneurism and free markets. Many activists are living in the Green-to-Yellow zone as they work to achieve positive results on a human scale through interaction, involvement, and purposeful learning and teaching. Some developing regions are still in the Purple-to-Red transition as ancient tribal ways confront well-armed dictators, while others are in the Red-to-Blue as centralized authority tries to contain

factional battles. Hotspots emerge as corporate interests from the Orange zone overwhelm indigenous peoples in the Purple-Blue range with ideas of progress and development schemes that don't fit the realities at hand and which ultimately destroy the less complex cultures, languages, and knowledge. Yet rescuers from the Green zone sometimes romanticize the primitive and non-functional, thus slowing natural emergence as much as exploiters from Orange seek to transform it to their own image. Yellow thinking begins to question and analyze all of these human processes as parts of an integrated spiral, and Turquoise is looking for solutions on a global, holistic scale. The next zone, Coral, may be the implementer, but that's in the future.

The **warm color family exhibits a focus on the external world** and how to master it (with an internal, I-oriented locus of control). The **cool colors have a focus on the inner world** and how to come to peace with it (with an external, we-oriented locus of control). The Spiral winds between the individual "I" and collective "we" poles as it turns between cool group systems and warm individualistic systems. As individuals, most of us are mixtures of both. This broad swing from individualism to collectivism and back is one to watch as societies move through time.

The SD/Graves model is **not a typology for categorizing people** into boxes. In fact, the eight levels of existence and the transition states between them are only the visible signs of much deeper forces at work. Those energies arise from the interaction of two elements: (a) the **Life Conditions** the person or group encounters and (b) the **brain/mind capacities** available to cope with such conditions. Thus, the term biopsychosocial suggests a moving blend of the biological nature, the psychology of experience and learning, and the sociology of group interaction with the world.

So, a person or a company is **both nature and nurture** -- the genetic heritage and bichemistry interacting with the learning and experiences of living. It is this interaction between mind/brain systems within and existential conditions outside that is central to Graves' work and energizes the emergence of the Spiral.



Within the **spiral is a double helix**. In the diagram above (and below), the alphabet letters on the left represent the Life Conditions -- a perception of "what the real world is like" -- at each level. The letters on the right represent the mind capacities -- the neurobiological equipment and mindsets required to deal with such a reality. The combinations -- AN, BO, CP, DQ, ER, FS, GT, HU, IV, etc., are represented by the colors

which symbolize their interaction. (These may also be presented as a series of 6 core themes which repeat after moving up a level, a part of Dr. Graves' hypothesis as yet unproven but fascinating to consider. Thus, AN through FS represents a First Tier of thinking systems. The next series, a Second Tier, is represented by the letters primed; thus A'N', B'O', C'P', etc. These suggest the base systems plus an additional set of mind/brain capacities brought online.)

The landmark Life Conditions (A, B, C, ... I, etc.)

- 1 **BEIGE A** a state of nature and biological urges/drives; physical senses dictate the state of being
- 2 **PURPLE B** threatening and full of mysterious powers and spirit beings which must be placated and appeased
- 3 **RED C** like a jungle where the tough and strong prevail, the weak serve; nature is an adversary to be conquered
- 4 **BLUE D** controlled by a Higher Power that punishes evil and eventually rewards good works and Righteous living
- 5 **ORANGE E** full of resources to develop and opportunities to make things better and bring prosperity
- 6 **GREEN F** the habitat wherein humanity can find love and purposes through affiliation and sharing
- 7 **YELLOW G** a chaotic organism where change is the norm and uncertainty an acceptable state of being
- 8 **TURQUOISE H** a delicately balanced system of interlocking forces in jeopardy at humanity's hands; chaotic
- 9 **CORAL I** (too soon to say, but should tend to be I-oriented, controlling, consolidating if the pattern to date holds)

The landmark coping means and neurology activated by such a world (N, O, P, ...U, etc.)

- BEIGE N** *instinctive*: as natural instincts and reflexes direct; automatic existence
- PURPLE O** *animistic*: according to tradition and ritual ways of group; tribal; animistic
- RED P** *egocentric*: asserting self for dominance, conquest, and power; exploitive; egocentric
- BLUE Q** *absolutistic*: obediently as higher authority and rules direct; conforming; guilt
- ORANGE E** *multiplistic*: pragmatically to achieve results and get ahead; test options; maneuver
- GREEN S** *relativistic*: respond to human needs; affiliative; situational; consensual; fluid
- YELLOW T** *systemic*: functional; integrative; interdependent; existential; flexible; questioning; accepting
- TURQUOISE U** *holistic*: experiential; transpersonal; collective consciousness; collaborative; interconnected

Note that the **letters are not locked together**. They can shift and, to some extent, can be shifted. Thus, it is possible for someone to live in an **E** level world but only have access to **Q** means of dealing with life;



the world will seem beyond the person's understanding at times -- the old-time government bureaucrat suddenly in a privatized agency that must prove its bottom-line effectiveness. Some things from the more complex level will not 'register' in this person's awareness and coping may be stressful, perhaps impossible. Some people can learn the more complex ways; others are less likely to.

Another person might have **T** capacities, yet work in a situation with a performance appraisal system concentrating on **D** or **E** measures; such a person is often underutilized and frustrated by a management system that appears to lag behind the thinking and focuses on issues that seem secondary

and narrow -- the IT professional working where punctuality and compliance with a dress code matters more than competence or creativity. If wise, the organization will adjust its management system to fit the person; if not, it will lose mind/brain power as the person moves elsewhere. **Getting the right person into the right job with the right materials at the right time within the right systems and structures is what SD is about.**

Consider the following ideas from Spiral Dynamics[®] :

- **The Spiral is a framework for how people think about things, not the things they think about. It represents containers that shape worldviews, not the contents that fill them (beliefs, values, etc.).**
- **There is no direct link with intelligence, gender, age, ethnicity, or other demographics except as those variables influence the world around the person.**
- **No level is inherently better or worse than another. They do become more expansive since each builds on all that came before.**
- **The theory is hierarchical in terms of conceptual space (the inclusion of progressively more factors and ways of understanding), but not in terms of intelligence in the conventional sense.**
- **The general trend is up the Spiral because thinking in more complex systems offers more degrees of freedom to act appropriately in a given situation by using more fully the mind/brain which is there.**
- **A person is not generally locked at a single level. The Gravesian systems are ways of thinking about things, not typologies for people, so several can coexist.**
- **Systems are rarely discrete and often run in combinations, though one often will be the dominant state.**
- **Individuals and organizations may appear to be largely of the warm-colored individualistic approach or the cool-colored collective world views, or a bit of both.**
- **Gravesian systems do not go away; they are subsumed within more complex layers and can rise to the surface if Life Conditions warrant. The Spiral is a two-way street.**
- **Beware of finding simplicity which is not there. The "emergent, cyclical, double-helix model of adult biopsychosocial systems development" of Dr. Clare W. Graves is more complex than many presenters suggest.**

- **Beware of complications which do not serve the theory. The model is elegant in itself and is sometimes wrapped in details which contribute little of substance and only add confusion.**
- **People may talk about more complex systems without actually operationalizing the ways of thinking and being they describe. Look for "stretch" versions of systems that talk a good game but do not live the worldview.**
- **People may shift their thinking to fit the conditions at hand and operate quite differently when under pressure or stress.**
- **There are entering and exiting phases between systems where most energy lies; the pure colors are only the theoretical peaks of waves.**
- **People value different things because they think in different ways. They think in different ways because the mixes of thinking systems (vMEMEs) in the biopsychosocial complexes in which they exist are different.**
- **Different organizations – companies and governments – occupy different positions on the Spiral and need to develop managerial/governance strategies that match their people, their visions of the future, and the jobs they perform today.**
- **Managers should develop a consistent and systemic approach to all the issues within the organizational loop – recruitment, selection, placement, training, internal management, and external marketing – so they all align, integrate, and synergize.**
- **Organizations should be constructed from both "the top down" and "the bottom up" to link the functions, intelligences, and decision structures that the more complex new problems ahead will demand.**
- **Successful organizations are in danger of failing if they continue to manage people in the ways that made them successful in the first place.**
- **Many people need to be managed quite differently today because they have moved on the Spiral even further and faster than most of their bosses, teachers, and even parents.**
- **Marketing efforts, strategic plans, and M&A efforts often fail because the designers look into mirrors and assume the audiences and cultures they are attempting to reach share the same values systems they do.**
- **The question is not "how do you motivate people?" but how do you relate what you are doing to their natural motivational flows. A person has a right to be who he or she is.**
- **Issues with productivity, quality, political instability, and restructuring are signs of growth and not decay which will force us to find new and innovative ways to manage people based on who they have now become.**
- **Since people learn in different ways from different kinds of teachers, the task of education is to match learners, instructors, learning situations, and technologies designed for fit, function, and flow.**
- **Dealing with the whole Spiral at once is the great challenge for Second Tier thinking (Yellow and beyond).**

The leading edge of human nature is now at a point of transition between the first six Subsistence Levels and the next series of human existential states, the Being Levels. It is a time of both danger

and opportunity as new ways of thinking, indeed, new sorts of human beings, emerge to prominence.



**Call or e-mail us for more information: [The Spiral Dynamics People](#)
Go to [Home Page](#)**

(c) Copyright 2000

NVC Consulting, SB CA 93140-2212

(805) 565-4782 (940) 368-6103 Fax (805) 695-8113

All Rights Reserved

Spiral graphic copyright the National Values Center, Inc. 1992

Spiral Dynamics® is a Registered Trademark of the National Values Center, Inc.