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Spiral Dynamics® is a way of thinking about human nature. Its intent is to make living better for individuals, groups, and even societies by increasing understanding of why we do as we do, and then to broaden our conception of choices about what we might do next.

This framework is based in the original research and theory of developmental scholar Dr. Clare W. Graves. It explores what makes us different and alike at levels deeper than the demographics of age or gender, economics or ethnicities. With these insights, it is possible to build education, business, and governance systems which fit who people are better, and to help diverse people to find contexts of best fit. In addition, it offers a trajectory for change, both progressive and regressive in our search for congruence and fit.

### Spiral + Dynamics

The term "Spiral Dynamics" refers to the cycling, expanding nature of this interactive emergent process, illustrated in many of Dr. Graves' diagrams, as well as the energetic forces which drive transformative change. Thus, we describe a spiral of dynamically emerging systems which people can engage in their lives.

While the spiral part provides a map, the dynamics are the energy that move us across it. That spiraling dynamic results when (a) the experience of being in this world interacts with (b) the amazing human brain. The outcome is a range of recognizable systems for coping with the world - as we sense it. That 'as we sense it' is where SD becomes especially useful since it describes those various systems for sorting our observations and the shape of the logically consistent worldviews that arise from them.

Moving along this spiral, SD highlights the entry of more factors into life's equation and the ability to incorporate other ways of knowing. It elaborates different ways of behaving that are congruent with shifting views of existence which are seen as appropriate and sensible by people functioning at those respective levels.

While it is an expansive sequence in some respects, this is not a hierarchy of wisdom or decency or even intelligences, much less happiness and worth. Instead, it delineates a series of different ways of prioritizing and framing those things as solutions to one set of problems create new ones which require new thinking to resolve. First congruence then, if necessary or possible, growth. There is an increase in cognitive complexity as we move through the systems, but not in intelligence. Different intelligences are valued differently at different levels, just as different levels have their own sense of the spiritual, of the social, and of the essential.

To the extent that higher levels offer more degrees of freedom and consider a more expansive group of elements, they are 'better than' lower levels in the long run. However, the qualitative key to this point of view is appropriateness: using the brain which is there in ways that are constructively adaptive to the realities at hand with the openness to deal with the world to come.

### A multidisciplinary approach

Spiral Dynamics describes what Dr. Graves termed biopsychosocial systems along a continuum that forms an expanding spiral. The term, bio-psycho-social, reflects Graves's insistence on the importance of a multidisciplinary, multidimensional approach to understanding human nature:

- "Bio" for the neurology and chemical energy of life and the organismic part of us
- "Psycho" for the variables of personality and life experiences, our temperaments and sense of self and relationships to other
- "Social" for the collective energy in group dynamics and culture as the interpersonal domain influences human behavior in collective settings ranging from small groups and families to corporations and entire societies
- "System" for the interdependence and action/reaction of these three upon one another in a coherent whole according to principles laid out in General Systems theory and other approaches to how things work and interact

### Spiritual aspects

These four elements coalesce within Gravesian levels, and within SD. Some users feel it is also appropriate to add "spiritual" with the result, "biopsychosociospiritual systems." This view holds spirituality as a distinct aspect of human nature that isn't integrated into the others, or else which transcends them.

It is our view that the SD levels explain why different perspectives on religion and spirituality exist, why there are different approaches to their expression, and why there are both conflicts and confluences among spiritual movements. From our perspective, biopsychosocial systems is sufficiently comprehensive and offers those interested in spirituality and religion a fresh window through which to look at the metaphysical and how people think about it.

### Evolving consciousness

Spiral Dynamics doesn't track well with intelligence as described by the old IQ models--higher levels aren't smarter than lower ones, or vice-versa. However, it relates better with multiple intelligences models (such as Gardner's approach) since they suggest differences in priorities. Temperament variables do not fit neatly into the Spiral Dynamics view, either. Although there are some correlations with factors like rigidity, authoritarianism and impulse control, some of these are linear relationships, and others appear to rise and fall in different systems. We suspect an increase in cognitive complexity, though this doesn't make one a better or worse person, either.

In other words, this is more of a quantitative than qualitative hierarchy, though more is not always better. Instead, SD describes differences in how people think, but not the worth of how they think; for that, congruence and appropriateness to the realities at hand are the keys. Thus, it reflects a variety of worldviews and conceptions of what life is about; but it doesn't suggest any one as the ideal. It describes variability in thinking, behavior, and conceptualization, not the worth or decency of a person.

So, although people don't get smarter or better as they move through the levels, they do broaden their perspectives and increase their options to act appropriately in a given situation. That's why the overall trend in human nature is up the spiral as our world becomes more complicated. They don't necessarily achieve higher planes of "consciousness" in the metaphysical sense of pop-spirituality; but they do become conscious of more complex factors in more elaborated ways. And they may well come to think about "consciousness" in new and different ways, thereby shifting their perspectives on the material and immaterial.

So the reasons for acting in particular ways change, as do the behaviors, themselves. Yet all of this doesn't necessarily make a person happier or sadder, wiser or more foolish, kinder or harsher, better adjusted or more out of sorts. It only increases their degrees of behavioral freedom and opens a different sense of what life is about.

#### Containers, not contents

Graves' concept was called "Value Systems Theory" for a long time. That title produced confusion, since most people have a clear definition of values in mind already. When we then add a word like 'moral' to values, the field is even more limiting. The Spiral Dynamics model is about moral or ethical standards; it addresses where those decisions come from and how they are made. Its focus is on *why* people adopt the values they do—not *what* those values are. It is a deep systems perspective for valuing—not a description of the collections of values held by different individuals, groups or societies since people who think alike can believe very different things; and people can agree on the very same thing despite vast differences in who they are.

Thus, you might think of values, moralities, standards, beliefs and priorities as **contents** ("memes" as defined by Richard Dawkins, Susan Blackmore, and others), and the Gravesian levels as **containers** for them (vMEMEs in the Spiral Dynamics model--valuing systems as meme attractors.) In some ways, containers delimit their contents—not everything fits or stays once it's put in. But in other ways, certain contents dictate the characteristics of their containers—and can't be forced into just anything. A paper cup is a poor vessel for helium, and even worse for molten steel.

The Spiral Dynamics model describes eight basic theoretical containers found thus far. They can hold all sorts of contents. The question is, how do they hold and react with them? How does the person using such a container(s) think about the thing? How is that container impacted by the contents put into it? If it changes, what's next?

#### Two interacting forces

The systems identified in Spiral Dynamics arise from the interaction of two elements

- The life conditions the person or group encounters
- The brain/mind capacities available to cope with such conditions

For his terminology, Dr. Graves used alphabet letters beginning with A to represent the life conditions that embody a certain kind of existential problems and a view of what the 'real' world is like. He used letters beginning with N to represent mind/brain capacities—the neurobiological equipment and mindsets required to recognize and deal with such a reality. Together, the life conditions + mind capacities produce a level of psychological existence in Gravesian terminology, a vMEME in the language of SD.

The idea of two interacting forces is central to Dr. Grave's theory and forms the foundation of Spiral Dynamics. That is to say that both genetic predisposition and neuronal systems as well as the experiences accrued in being alive and conscious help shape who we are. The use of letter pairs (rather than colors or numbers) serves to emphasize this double-helix notion and sets this model apart from many others that rely only on typologies and traits, or which do not recognize the interplay of environmentsocial challenges with neurological systems.

A person isn't generally locked at a single level. The letter pairs can shift with respect to each other and, to some extent, be shifted by conditions. For example, it's possible for someone to live in an E-level world but only have access to Q means of dealing with life; or to have F thinking while being caught up with overwhelming P. Whether at work or in school, we are over-stretched and stressed or under-employed and bored because of these misalignments.

Take an old-time government seniority-oriented bureaucrat who suddenly finds himself in a newly- privatized agency that must prove its bottom-line effectiveness in a competitive, out-sourced climate. For this individual, the world will seem incomprehensible at times. Some things from the more complex level simply won't "register" in his awareness and coping may be stressful—perhaps impossible. Some people can learn more complex ways of coping and interacting; others may not be able to. Or imagine a bright and creative new employee anxious to try new ideas suddenly assigned to work in a culture that values obedience, punctuality, routine, and not making waves above all else. The alignment of the letters matters.

	LIFE CONDITIONS			BRAIN/MIND COPING CAPACITIES
<b>A</b>	State of nature and biological urges and drives: physical senses dictate the state of being.	<b>BEIGE</b>	<b>N</b>	Instinctive: as natural instincts and reflexes direct; automatic existence.
<b>B</b>	Threatening and full of mysterious powers and spirit beings that must be placated and appeased.	<b>PURPLE</b>	<b>O</b>	Animistic: according to tradition and ritual ways of group: tribal; animistic.
<b>C</b>	Like a jungle where the tough and strong prevail, the weak serve; nature is an adversary to be conquered.	<b>RED</b>	<b>P</b>	Egocentric: asserting self for dominance, conquest and power. Exploitive; egocentric.
<b>D</b>	Controlled by a Higher Power that punishes evil and eventually rewards good works and righteous living.	<b>BLUE</b>	<b>Q</b>	Absolutistic: obediently as higher authority and rules direct; conforming; guilt.

<b>E</b>	Full of resources to develop and opportunities to make things better and bring prosperity.	<b>ORANGE</b>	<b>R</b>	Multiplicitic; pragmatically to achieve results and get ahead; test options; maneuver
<b>F</b>	The habitat wherein humanity can find love and purposes through affiliation and sharing.	<b>GREEN</b>	<b>S</b>	Relativistic; respond to human needs; affiliative; situational; consensual; fluid.
<b>G</b>	A chaotic organism where change is the norm and uncertainty an acceptable state of being.	<b>YELLOW</b>	<b>T</b>	Systemic; functional; integrative; interdependent; existential; flexible; questioning; accepting.
<b>H</b>	A delicately balanced system of interlocking forces in jeopardy at humanity's hands; chaordic.	<b>TURQUOISE</b>	<b>U</b>	Holistic; experiential; transpersonal; collective consciousness; collaborative; interconnected.
<b>I</b>	Too soon to say, but should tend to be I-oriented; controlling, consolidating if the pattern holds.	<b>CORAL</b>	<b>V</b>	Next neurological capacities. The theory is open-ended up to the limits of <i>Homo sapiens'</i> brain.
<b>The theory is open-ended, with the possibility of more systems ahead...</b>				

(*GT, HU, and IV are also designated as A'N', B'O', C'P', etc. See FAQ for more.*)

### Seeing the systems in colors

We use colors in Spiral Dynamics—beige, purple, red, blue, orange, green, yellow, and turquoise (coral would be next)—to represent the letter combinations—AN, BO, CP, DQ, ER, FS, GT, HU, IV. These colors are a metaphor and symbolic code to make conversation easier since they break from overt hierarchy—it's hard to say whether Green or Blue is better. They were deliberately *not* related to chakras or other color schemes. In fact, these colors were introduced only as a graphic element to make training materials more attractive. Some people who are satisfied with simple renditions use them as their primary descriptors. Dr. Graves himself used the letter pairs almost exclusively to describe the various systems, though he occasionally used numbers, as well.

You can think of the colors as representing what people in each world seek out in life as the systems grow out of those which came before.

- Beige (**AN**). Survival; biogenic needs satisfaction; reproduction; satisfy instinctive urges.
- Purple (**BO**). Placate spirit realm; honor ancestors; protection from harm; family bonds.
- Red (**CP**). Power/action; asserting self to dominate others; control; sensory pleasure.
- Blue (**DQ**). Stability/order; obedience to earn reward later; meaning; purpose; certainty.
- Orange (**ER**). Opportunity/success; competing to achieve results; influence; autonomy.
- Green (**FS**). Harmony/love; joining together for mutual growth; awareness; belonging.
- Yellow (**GT**). Independence/self-worth; fitting a living system; knowing; good questions.
- Turquoise (**HU**). Global community/life force; survival of life on Earth; consciousness.

The colors symbolize the "nodal" states—hypothetical peaks on a series of overlapping, wave-like curves. There are sub-systems between the peaks where the thinking represented by the adjacent colors blend together. (In original Gravesian language, this is done with letter pairs in upper and lower case.) You could think of them as string of holiday lights. Each light is on its own dimmer. They brighten and fade as conditions change. Sometimes the shift is by conscious choice, more often not.

The cyclical aspect of the Graves/Spiral Dynamics theory is depicted with the colors, as well. You might have noticed two color families—warm and cool—alternating (above). The warm group (beige, red, orange, yellow, etc.) describes an internal "I-focused" locus of control and a way of living centered on self-expression and the ability to change and master the external world. These tend to be change-oriented. The various levels of are differentiated by how this expression of self takes place and the foundation of other systems on which it rests.

The cool group (purple, blue, green, turquoise, etc.) describes a "we-oriented" locus of control and a way of living centered on self-sacrifice and the ability to stabilize and come to peace with the inner world. These tend to be stabilization-oriented and emphasize attention to external anchors and authorities. They, too, are differentiated in their forms of collectivism and the self-express systems subsumed within them.

The spiral winds between a series of individualistic "I" and collective "we" poles as it turns between cool, self-denying group systems, and warm, individualistic, self-expressing systems. As persons, most of us are mixtures of both, often living in the transitional phases, and sometimes settling predominantly with one family or the other. Organizations are also mixtures, though their cultures often take a tone of 'coolness' or 'warmness' in emphasis. These broad swings from individualism to collectivism and back are also something to note as societies move through time and cultures adjust to changes in life conditions in the world around them.

### Not a typology

The Spiral Dynamics/Graves model is not a typology for categorizing people into seven or eight rigid boxes; it's not that simple. These are ways of thinking about a thing that resides in varying proportions within human beings and which ebb and flow within us; they are not labels for kinds of human beings. We move into and out of them. They can coexist within us, though we tend to find a zone of comfort that works so long as conditions remain unchanged. This explains why the Spiral Dynamics model is an emergent sequence and not a developmental stair step tied to age. There is no mandate for movement, nor for stagnation; and no predictable timeline when there is or isn't change, only a probable sequence as we move forward or back in our search for balance and congruence with our worlds.

So, the question is not how to deal with a 'kind of person,' or even with people at a given level; the question is how to deal with the thinking of the level when it is activated in its particular way within the particular person. While most of us operate with mixtures and blends of these colors to some extent, one or two are often dominant.

### Themes that repeat

The table above illustrates the colors and letter pairs—AN, BO, CP, DQ, ER, FS, and GT, as well as the fuzzier HU and the possibility of IV plus more since the theory is open-ended. In his later work, Graves posited that there might be six basic themes which repeat in human nature. (Other theorists have proposed similar patterns.) (Rather than being a continuum of eight or more systems, they can also be presented as a series of six core themes that repeat. This aspect of Dr. Graves's hypothesis is as yet unproven but fascinating to consider and widely promoted.

Beginning with an individual survival mode, the phases go up to a broad collective. At that point, the cycle begins again at a higher level, individualism in a context which includes all the previous systems. Thus, AN through FS represent a first run-through—a *first tier* of thinking systems. Graves called these the “subsistence levels” because they focus on relatively basic human needs. The first repeat—the *second tier*—is represented by the base letters primed; thus A'N', B'O', etc. Graves called these the “being levels” because subsistence needs are subsumed beneath quality-of-existence issues once the problems of the first six levels are in hand. The primes suggest similarities to the base systems, plus an additional set of neuronal capacities brought online. This is all hypothesis, of course, and it now looks to us that the gap between first tier and second tier—a transition Graves called a “momentous leap”—is far narrower than sometimes reported, if it exists at all.

**So what is SD?**

Spiral Dynamics is a way of thinking about who we are, a point of view about human nature and how it changes. The model differentiates some well-researched 'levels of psychological existence,' then offers suggestions for dealing with people centralized in them more effectively. It represents a different approach to human diversity, one rooted in how we think about things and conceptualize our worlds. It is not a religion, nor a doctrine, nor a dogma rooted in matters of faith. SD is an application of a data-based psychological model, and aims at making it practically constructive and useful in people's lives. If SD does that, we are happy.

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