

A Personal Counterpoint to Stein and Heikkinen

Michael Basseches

I want to start my comments with my personal applause for the work of all of those colleagues who have put tremendous effort into improving the systematic measurement of developmental phenomena. The many ways in which this body of work is of value is beyond the scope of my brief comments here. Here, I want to address the context in which Stein and Heikkinen review this work.

In my book *Dialectical Thinking and Adult Development*, published in 1984, I attempted not only to describe the organization and identifiable possible indicators of dialectical thinking as a form of organization of thought. I also tried to justify the claim that dialectical thinking represented a more developed form of thought than both universalistic formal thought and relativistic thought. This effort at justification relied heavily on philosophical argument and examples that demonstrated that dialectical thought represented a higher level of cognitive equilibrium – more differentiated, integrated, stable and adaptive. I saw the description and the justification offered as the core of the book’s contribution. The cross-sectional data, reported from my doctoral dissertation, that a group of college faculty demonstrated more development of dialectical thinking than a group of college seniors, who in turn demonstrated more development of dialectical thinking than a group of first-year college students was consistent with the argument, but not in any way a substitute for the philosophical argument. Quite likely there are other measures that would demonstrate parallel findings differentiating college faculty from seniors and seniors from first-years, e.g. mean income, mean number of children, and mean weight. However, such findings should not and would not be taken as indicative of development.

While I don’t mean to suggest that this very simple example is at all comparable to the very sophisticated approaches to empirical validation of measures that Stein and Heikkinen discuss, I bring it up to introduce important ways in which my own assumptions agree with and differ from theirs. I agree with their view, as summarized by Murray and Reams, that “there is a persistent fact/value confusion in the field of developmental research and application, in which higher levels of development are assumed, implicitly or without sufficient justification, to be desired and of superior value.” Where I think I differ from them, is in regard to what kind of justification of “superior value” is appropriate.

At an epistemological level, when it comes to the concept of development, I don’t believe that any amount or form of empirical data can substitute for philosophical argument. Development, as I use the term in my book and as I think is consistent with the Piagetian genetic epistemology tradition, remains an essentially philosophical idea. While Piaget’s contribution was to offer observations of ontogenesis as a novel way of addressing existing epistemological questions, ontogenetic data were used in the service of philosophical argument and demonstration, rather than offered as a substitute.



Put simply, I would never want for any of my readers to adopt the view that dialectical thinking represented a more adequate form of cognitive organization, unless they could understand why and how it was more adequate. Nor would I accept as more adequate any proposed form of reasoning if I couldn't see why and how it was more adequate, no matter what the validity and reliability profiles of the measures were. I believe one can integrate empirical and philosophical justification, but neither can be reduced to nor be substituted for the other. If one is unable to appreciate the value of a supposedly more sophisticated structure of reasoning or action than one's own customary form, one should not accept its value until one has reached a point where one can understand its value.

With regard to dialectical thinking, my correspondence and interaction with the many who have showed particular interest in my work has indicated that in each case they have been attracted to dialectical thinking by some sense, (gathered perhaps in part from my own work and/or from their own intellectual adventures,) that there is something more complex and more epistemologically adequate about dialectical thinking. With regard to expectations about my own intellectual development, I expect, based on developmental theory, I would expect that I would begin the process of starting to appreciate a proposed "higher-level" structure only after I encountered the limits of my lower level structure, and began to glimpse the power of the novel alternative to transcend those limits. Further discovery, and a reorganization process would need to ensue before I mastered and fully grasped the value of the "higher-level" structure. This process is as it should be – totally appropriate.

From my perspective it would be a perversion of the developmental process if I rejected the adequacy of my own reasoning, simply because a developmental researcher—an authority figure—tested me using measures with quality-control approved stringent reliability and validity profiles and told me I had a low score. If a teacher expected me or others to do so, I would view him or her as a teacher intellectually disrespectful of his or her students—a kind of teacher who fails to promote real development. In my view we need fewer of such teachers, rather than a new cadre armed with such validated development measures to legitimize their authority. For clarification, I ask whether Stein and Heikkinen would view such teaching as ethical practice.

In considering such teachers, I begin to address the more pragmatic aspects of Stein and Heikkinen's argument, "If we want to see an integral and developmental worldview gain a real institutional foothold—radically reforming business, government, education, therapy, and our own sense of human potentials—we need to get serious about our quality control standards" (p. 19). Whether or not I want to see that happen would depend on *how* such a world-view might gain a foothold. Because I view as dangerous the idea that any kind of empirical validation of measures could substitute for the philosophical arguments on behalf of the value of developmental phenomena, the quote above raises for me the specter of people who neither understand nor are convinced by the arguments beginning to systematically evaluate other people, even choosing who to hire or who to promote in the workplace, based on standardized measures of developmental phenomena. I find this terrifying. It suggests a tyranny of measures that replaces respectful discourse and collective adaptation as the social context in which development does or doesn't occur. It suggests those with an integral and developmental world view becoming an elite that would use social institutions to ideologically and socio-politically dominate the "developmentally inferior."

I very much appreciate the work of Stein and Heikkinen and of the editors of Integral Review for encouraging discussion of this crucially important epistemological issue. Such discussion must be critical discussion, and it is critically important at a time when the measurement of adult development seems to be moving from the role of supporting conceptualizations of intellectual problems toward becoming a basis for the way people treat other people in the contexts to which Stein and Heikkinen allude. I also appreciate the invitation to participate.

Sincerely,
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