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Lifelong development of object wholeness/another perspective

Summary: Psychodynamic theories of development primarily focus on early development and how it shapes later patterns of human behavior. One of the eight key emotional competencies in Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy is object wholeness, a concept introduced by Melanie Klein (Klein, 1940). Klein explored the earliest stages of object wholeness development and identified manifestations of its deficiencies in adults. We believe that further research into the developmental stages of this ability during later periods of life is valuable. A relevant study comes from an author who uses Jane Loevinger's theory of ego development as a frame of reference (Loevinger, 1970). This paper provides a brief overview of Loevinger's theory, connects it with Klein's findings, and incorporates the contributions of Fairbairn and Kohut to present a potential model for the lifelong development of object wholeness, its relationship to polarities, and the path toward wisdom. Discoveries about ego development from research outside of psychotherapy can greatly enhance our understanding of psychological development, helping us better comprehend the stages of development and what Vygotsky (1993) refers to as the "zone of proximal development." Understanding where we are headed and the "stations" along the way allows us to more effectively guide those on their developmental journey.

In this paper, we also present an understanding of ego development through the lens of the development of relationships to opposites, as proposed by Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011). This perspective offers a different view of the ability to fully experience object wholeness, as described by Melanie Klein during early childhood. It suggests that development starts and ends with object wholeness, progressing from unity to separation, and ultimately returning to unity at a higher level.

Keywords: object wholeness, polarity, integration, ego development

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The object wholeness - the glue of the psyche

"For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor ought so good but, strain'd from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
And vice sometime by action dignified."

(Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet", speech by Friar Lawrence)

1. Introduction

Object wholeness is a term introduced into psychoanalytic theory by Melanie Klein (Klein, 1940). Developing object wholeness involves overcoming the mechanism of splitting, a primitive defense mechanism by which the psyche separates the positive and negative aspects of object experience, treating them as though they were two distinct objects. In psychoanalysis, the term "object" refers to a person, an object, a situation, or any other entity towards which feelings of love or hatred are directed. According to Melanie Klein, every child, in the early stages of development, passes through a "schizoid-paranoid position," in which splitting is the dominant defense mechanism, preventing the child from experiencing the object as a whole (Klein, M., 1948). In this phase, the child experiences the mother as divided into a good mother ("good breast"), who is loved, and a bad mother ("bad breast"), who is hated. As the child develops, the integration of the good and bad aspects of the object, the self, and the world leads to what Klein describes as a "depressive position." This results in feelings of guilt due to aggressive impulses directed at the object, which the child now perceives as a whole. To the extent that the child's experience is dominated by positive feelings toward the object, the child develops the need to "repair the object" — to repair the "damage" caused by aggressive fantasies directed at the beloved object.

As long as negative experiences and feelings toward the object dominate, the reparation process remains unsuccessful. The tension becomes too great for the ego to control, leading to a regressive return to the schizoid position, in which the object is split into good and bad. We assert that only this regressive return to the splitting mechanism can be considered a defense, and that the world of split good and bad objects, experienced in early life, represents a natural state of the immature ego. Defensive regressive behavior arises from the anxiety experienced when attempting to reconcile the good and bad representations of the object into a unified whole — the "realization" that we hate what we love, that we have fantasies of destroying the object on which we depend. Integrating these intensely conflicting feelings and representations into a single whole is difficult. However, as long as intense ambivalence does not dominate — when positive experiences of the object prevail — the ego can tolerate ambivalence and navigate the

depressive position through the reparative process. At this point, splitting ceases to be a necessary defense.

According to its function, object wholeness can be described as the "glue" of the psyche. It represents the ability to integrate different aspects of one's experience (both positive and negative) concerning oneself, others, and reality as a whole. When this function is impaired, individuals often express the perception of a person with a fragmented object representation using colloquial terms such as: "he's unhinged," "he cracked," "he flipped out," or "he lost it." In clinical language, this is referred to as "personality fragmentation."
Object wholeness is what enables an individual to perceive themselves, others, and the world in a realistic manner, without distorting their perceptions to fit an idealized or desired image. The defense mechanism of splitting, which arises when object wholeness is not adequately developed, creates a significant distortion in the experience of reality by separating the positive and negative aspects of the same object into distinct, opposing categories ("partial objects"). This process of splitting leads to a fragmentation of the self. The primary cognitive operation employed by those who struggle with object wholeness is categorization and classification, wherein distinct classes and categories are sharply divided and seen as mutually exclusive. Individuals with a well-developed sense of object wholeness are able to remain "intact, glued, and integrated," even under significant stress. The predominance of positive emotions—what we refer to as basic trust and optimism—persists, thanks to this "glue," even in the face of overwhelming negative emotions. When experiencing anger or fear, such individuals do not lose sight of the positive aspects of themselves, others, or reality. These positive aspects serve to protect them from being completely overwhelmed by negative emotions.

Fairbairn (1952), building upon Klein's concept of internalized objects, posited that the foundation of later repression mechanisms lies within object relations, rather than instincts, as Freud had suggested. He asserts: "The first defenses used by the still immature ego in mastering unsatisfactory relationships with others are mental internalizations or introjections of the object of dissatisfaction."

The child's ego is organized around defenses against unsatisfactory object relations. Initially, these defenses are based on the splitting of conflicting experiences, projection, introjection, and negation. This results in a "vertical split" of the self.

Kohut (1971, 1977) elaborated on the various manifestations of deficiencies in the cohesiveness of the self through the mechanisms of vertical and horizontal splitting of the personality. In vertical splitting, two distinct selves emerge, separated on an experiential level ("double personality").

One self is the "superman self," typically formed from the experiences mirrored by the parent, reflecting what the parent valued in the child due to its alignment with their narcissistic needs. The other is the "miserable self," which develops from the lack of mirroring and validation of the child's authentic self, including their needs, ambitions, talents, and skills. Such an individual may exhibit alternating behaviors: arrogance and a sense of superiority in certain contexts, while displaying helplessness and feelings of worthlessness in others. This successive splitting, referred to as "temporal splitting," results in fragmented representations of self or object across time, leading to split personalities that appear to possess independent existences ("Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"). In horizontal splitting, the mechanism involves the suppression of grandiose needs and fantasies, which can give rise to a lack of ambition, inertia, "false modesty," and feelings of emptiness, numbness, and a lack of initiative. The self becomes divided horizontally into conscious and unconscious aspects of the unique self.

Achieving and maintaining the integrity of the experience of self and object is a crucial ability for ego development and personality integration. The term "object" has a broad definition. Objects refer not only to significant figures in the child's development but also to anything in which emotional investments are made. We can experience our self, other people, our work, and our life as either complete or fragmented. For example, living in the past reflects a lack of completeness in the experience of our life over time, while living "from today to tomorrow," focused only on the present, also reflects a lack of experiencing one's life as a whole. Excessive emphasis on one aspect of the self, such as ambition in work, while neglecting others, such as the ability to love or maintain good health, also reflects the fragmentation of the self. The ability to maintain the integrity of an object is the "centripetal force" of personality, the force that sustains cohesion. A deficiency in this ability leads to an intense fear of fragmentation, or "falling apart."

The integrity of the object is the capacity that makes us whole, individuals "of one piece," and integrated. It also encompasses what makes our experience of others and reality whole—integrated. However, this ability does not simply develop in early childhood, provided that the relationship with the object is sufficiently adequate, but follows its own developmental trajectory throughout life. Klein described the earliest stages of the development of object-wholeness and some manifestations of deficits in this ability in adulthood. We argue that monitoring the developmental stages of this ability in later stages of life is a promising area for further research. One such study is based on a theoretical framework rooted in the theory of ego development (Loevinger, 1970).

2. Maturation of personality through opposites

Beena Sharma and Susanne Cook-Greuter (Sharma and Cook-Greuter, 2011) explore the relationship between personality maturation and the mastery of polarities, specifically how

individuals make sense of their experiences through opposites. Thinking in opposites is deeply ingrained in the way we interpret our experiences. Whenever we extract something from the phenomenological continuum, we automatically create an object (A) and its opposite (not-A). Describing experiences in dualistic terms is inevitable in everyday language. Integrating interdependent opposites is a central aspect of developing a comprehensive perspective on reality. The fact that much human suffering arises from mental mechanisms that split experience into opposing categories such as good-bad, light-dark, and pleasure-pain has been acknowledged since ancient times. Inherent in our method of making sense of the world, as we become more socialized members of society, is the attribution of value to the desirable and undesirable aspects of experience. Our inclination to form preferences, accompanied by moral judgment, leads us to favor one aspect of experience over its opposite. The Buddha taught that our strong attachment to a particular aspect of reality—one of the opposites—is the root cause of suffering. We often wish to eliminate opposites from our lives, seeking to overcome weaknesses through willpower, extend life through advances in medicine, or slow aging through scientific possibilities. Maturity brings the realization that "a glass of bile needs a glass of honey... when mixed, it is the easiest to drink" (Njegoš, *Gorski vijenac*). We begin to recognize that what we have regarded as mutually exclusive choices are, in fact, interdependent dimensions of a single reality, in which one concept can only be understood through its opposite. Only a few individuals learn to accept the unfiltered experience of reality beyond our constructs and symbolic representations.

Beena Sharma and Susanne Cook-Greuter (Sharma & Cook-Greuter, 2011) pose several key questions: 1. How and to what degree do oppositions and polarities contribute to meaning-making? 2. Are there polarities specific to each stage of ego development that adults must navigate? If so, what are these polarities? 3. Is there a connection between the stage of ego development a person has reached and the way they relate to polarities?

Development begins with differentiation, following the stage of symbiotic fusion with the object. The Bible also begins with differentiation and naming: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth; then He created the light and separated it from the darkness, and He called the light day and the darkness night." He then instructed Adam to give names to the animals and plants, thereby marking and differentiating them by their names. Continuing development involves progressive distinction and differentiation. Starting from a simple dualistic division of some continuum into "light and dark," "day and night," "positive and negative," progressive differentiation and elaboration lead us from undifferentiated beginnings to greater knowledge and control over the world.

However, differentiation is only one side of polarity. No matter how useful and developmental it may be, it loses its meaning without its opposite. The construction of meaning also relies on the process of comparing and recognizing similarities. As we mature, we learn to distinguish

between what is similar and what is different, enabling us to construct a coherent mental or symbolic map of reality. The more complex and integrated our map of reality becomes, the more developed we are. However, the mechanisms of progressive differentiation and elaboration inevitably reach a limit, beyond which further differentiation becomes excessively complex and experientially meaningless. Integration is required.

Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011) state: “Ego-development theory is a theory about people's distinctive stories about who they are, what is important to them, where they are going, and what they imagine the world and reality to be. The theory explores how people create different meanings in the lives they live. It describes the ego construct as the heart of the human drive to create meaning. According to the theory of ego development, the ego has two functions: 1. The ego as a processor perceives, mediates, orchestrates, metabolizes, and digests both external and internal experiences during development, processing the most subtle differences in transcendent reality. The ego is thus seen as a tireless storyteller, a creator of meaning. 2. The ego as representation, on the other hand, integrates all aspects of experience to tell a coherent story about itself. It does this by creating permanent and solid self-images to ward off the fear of non-being and transience.”

Research by Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011), using the SCTi-MAP (Sentence Completion Test Integral - Maturity Assessment Profile), shows that there are patterns in the stories the ego communicates that change across the developmental trajectory. MAP is based on the assumption that our language reflects the complexity of our map of reality and the level of differentiation and integration we have reached. The depth, complexity, and range of our perspective are evolving. As the individual matures, the ego tells a new story about "Who I am" and "How reality works." The theory of ego development provides a diagram of these pathways of changing self-representations, distinguishing nine different stages of adult development, each of which is a discrete level of self-identification. People at each stage create meaning in a unique way that is qualitatively different from the previous stage. Each subsequent stage represents a transformation of the previous perspective, i.e., it includes and transcends the prior point of view.

Before we proceed to the developmental stages of the relationship to opposites, let us first clarify how the authors define the key terms they use:

1. *Opposites* 2. Different Types of Opposites: (A) *Value-neutral* and (B) *Value-colored*. 3.*Polarities and Multiplicity.*

Opposites refer to "the other part of a pair that is corresponding or complementary in position, function, or nature, differing in quality, direction, result, or significance." These two elements that make up opposites are often referred to as "poles." Opposites can be categorized as: (a) Value-neutral and (b) Value-colored.

Value-neutral opposites are descriptive without an evaluative component, such as long-short, big-small, or boy-girl. In these cases, neither element is inherently better or worse, more desirable or less desirable. Value-colored opposites refer to pairs of seemingly opposing, contradictory values that carry evaluative judgments and generate tension. These opposites are marked by a positive or negative value attached to each element. For example, one gender may be viewed as better or more desirable than the other.

Children absorb these value-colored distinctions through socialization and acculturation, learning to internalize which behaviors or characteristics are considered "good" (e.g., "clean" rather than "dirty") and which are "bad" (e.g., "naughty" rather than "good"). Displaying traits associated with one gender may result in reward, while displaying traits associated with the other may lead to punishment. This tendency extends and we begin to attribute value judgments to all our experiences related to opposites.

2.1. Polarities and multiplicities

When both poles within a pair have a positive or negative value, they are referred to as polarities. Polar pairs consist of two interdependent poles, both of which may be desirable at different times in order to maintain a system. For instance, "firm" - "flexible" are positive opposites, as are "structured" - "flexible." Multiplicities represent relationships between concepts in which multiple poles or polarities are interconnected. These are commonly encountered in theories that explain the interdependence of more than two elements or poles. For example, to fully understand the human being, it is important to consider the relationship between mind and body, emotions and reason, as well as the spiritual and material.

The human tendency to transform polarities, which are essentially interdependent positive pairs of concepts, values, or constructs, into opposites leads to tension between poles that, in reality, constitute an interdependent dynamic whole. To function adequately in reality, both poles of polarity are necessary. In some situations, being structured is beneficial, while in others, being flexible is more advantageous; sometimes firmness is required, and other times softness. Until we mature, we are unable to perceive the dynamic and interdependent relationship between the parts and the whole.

Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011, p.30) provide the following example (Figure 1) to clarify the general structure and nature of polarity.

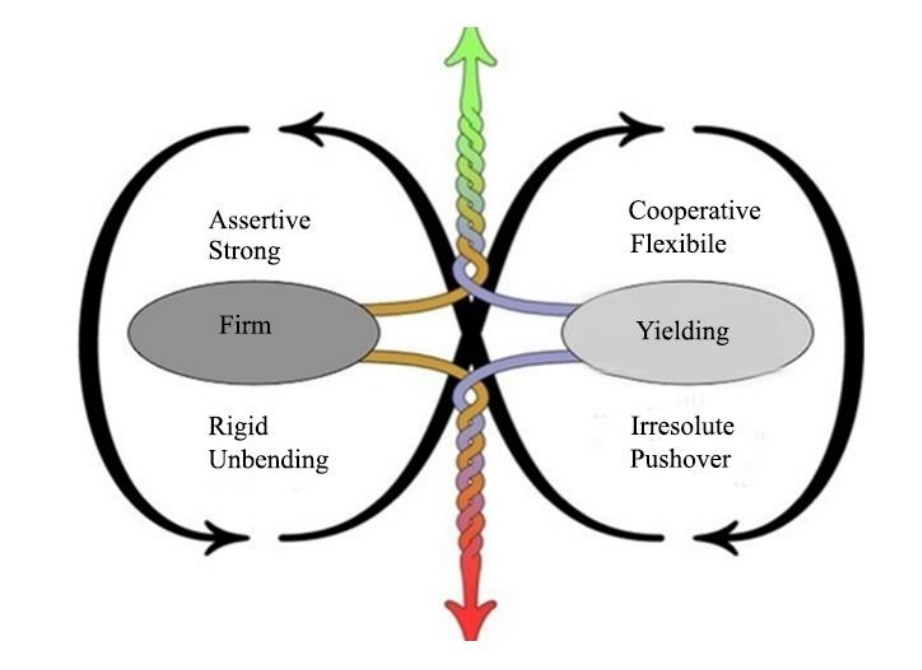

Figure 1. *Firm-yielding* polarity map

Each pole in polarity carries a value. In the context of polarity: being firm and yielding, assertiveness and strength are positive aspects of firmness, while cooperation and flexibility are positive aspects of yielding. When we become overly focused on valuing one gender and exclude the other, negative aspects emerge: we become rigid and unyielding if we emphasize firmness, or indecisive and submissive if we prioritize indulgence. If one gender in a pair becomes preferred, its interdependent opposite is excluded, neglected, or rejected. We then tend to describe the opposite pole in terms of its negative aspects, dismissing the positive aspects it possesses.

This illustrates how the tendency to split experiences is connected to valuation, culture, and its pervasive influence on speech and thinking. Polarization prevents us from recognizing the inherent value of the opposition and attaining wisdom. Psychotherapists encounter this daily in their practice—discords, conflicts, disagreements, and misunderstandings between individuals, along with mutual devaluation stemming from the valuation of different oppositions. When we discuss the will and its manipulation, we observe that the inability to integrate opposition leads individuals to become passive or active manipulators. Similarly, in choosing a partner, one often encounters a selection of someone who overemphasizes the opposition we have rejected within ourselves.

Research that is not clinical, which does not stem from psychotherapeutic experience but instead utilizes the analysis of language—through language-oriented instruments such as MAP—

reaches similar conclusions regarding the importance of developmental pathways of object wholeness and the ability to integrate opposites.

When we observe the relation of a person's polarities over time, we observe oscillations between the two poles, with dynamics that often resemble an endless loop. The more strongly we value one polarity, the more we fear losing it, and the more we reject its opposite. We fear losing our identity if we allow for an alternative perspective. However, it often happens that when a person emphasizes one polarity, they also encounter the limitations of the preferred pole—their less desirable side—making the positive aspects of the opposite temporarily attractive as a natural solution: "allowing myself to be like that." The fear of losing the preferred pole generally prevents these attempts to integrate the opposition. This inability to reassess and find value in the rejected oppositions can lead to developmental stagnation.

When discussing psychotherapeutic techniques that facilitate the development of object wholeness, we find that they typically involve "experimenting" with opposites in an environment where the client feels accepted and encouraged to explore the opposites they have rejected. Overcoming black-and-white thinking and embracing dialectical thinking are important indicators of development and, according to the theory of ego development, serve as markers for transcending the conformist stage.

How firmly a person adheres to a particular polarity, as well as how they evaluate others' preferences and to what extent they invest in an "either-or" perspective, can serve as indicators of a specific stage in ego development. By monitoring respondents' stated or implicit preferences in their responses to the MAP, the authors utilized this instrument to assess the level of ego maturity, exploring three ways in which polarities can be significant in the development of the ego: 1. The arc of polarity that underlies the entire developmental trajectory, 2. The shift from the "either-or" perspective in the conventional stage to the inclusion of both perspectives in the postconventional stages, 3. The specific preferences for certain polarities at different stages of ego development.

1. *Arc of polarity: The* theory of ego development posits that human beings progress through stages of differentiation and integration. As shown in Figure 2, development begins with an unconscious, symbiotic fusion with the mother at birth, progressing toward the differentiation and demarcation of the self, ultimately reaching the highest conventional stage—the stage of consciousness. Thus, the first five stages of ego development in adults, from the impulsive stage to the stage of conscientiousness, reflect a fundamental trend toward differentiation between the self and others/environment.

We have already mentioned that the salvation stage was considered the stage people reach in Western countries. However, research over the past fifty years has shown that adults can develop beyond the conventional stages and that such development can be classified. Kok-Greuter (1985, p. 32), as illustrated in Figure 2, divided Loevinger's broadly defined *Integrative*

Stage into two developmental stages: the *construct-awareness* stage and *the unifying stage* . In the construct-awareness stage, individuals become aware of how reality is both perceived and constructed through filters shaped by language. The individualistic stage is also referred to as the pluralistic stage. In the theory of ego development, movements beyond the conventional stages are described as a process of deconstructing previous positions toward increasing integration. The four post-conventional stages demonstrate a pervasive trend toward assimilation and integration, along with a growing awareness of belonging and unity with humanity and the planet. The arc of development, therefore, progresses from differentiation (the initial part of the journey) to integration.

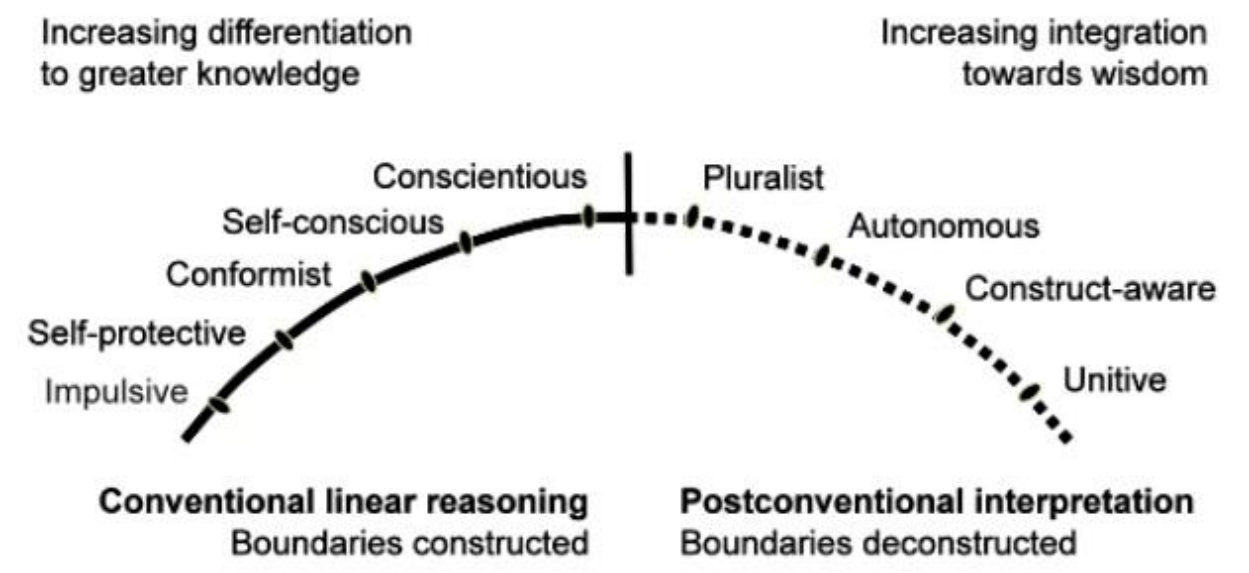

Figure 2. Arc of polarity-differentiation and integration

The functioning of the *differentiation-integration* polarities can also be observed during transitions from one stage to another in the development of the ego. In Figure 3 (Cook-Greuter, 1985), we see that in certain stages (*self-protective, self-aware, pluralistic-individualist, and construct-awar*e), each subsequent stage is characterized by differentiating oneself from the previously achieved integration. In contrast, *the conformist, conscientious, autonomous, and unitive* stages represent stages of new integration. The polarity of integration-differentiation is rooted in two conflicting human urges: autonomy (independence, individuality) and homonomy (belonging, togetherness).

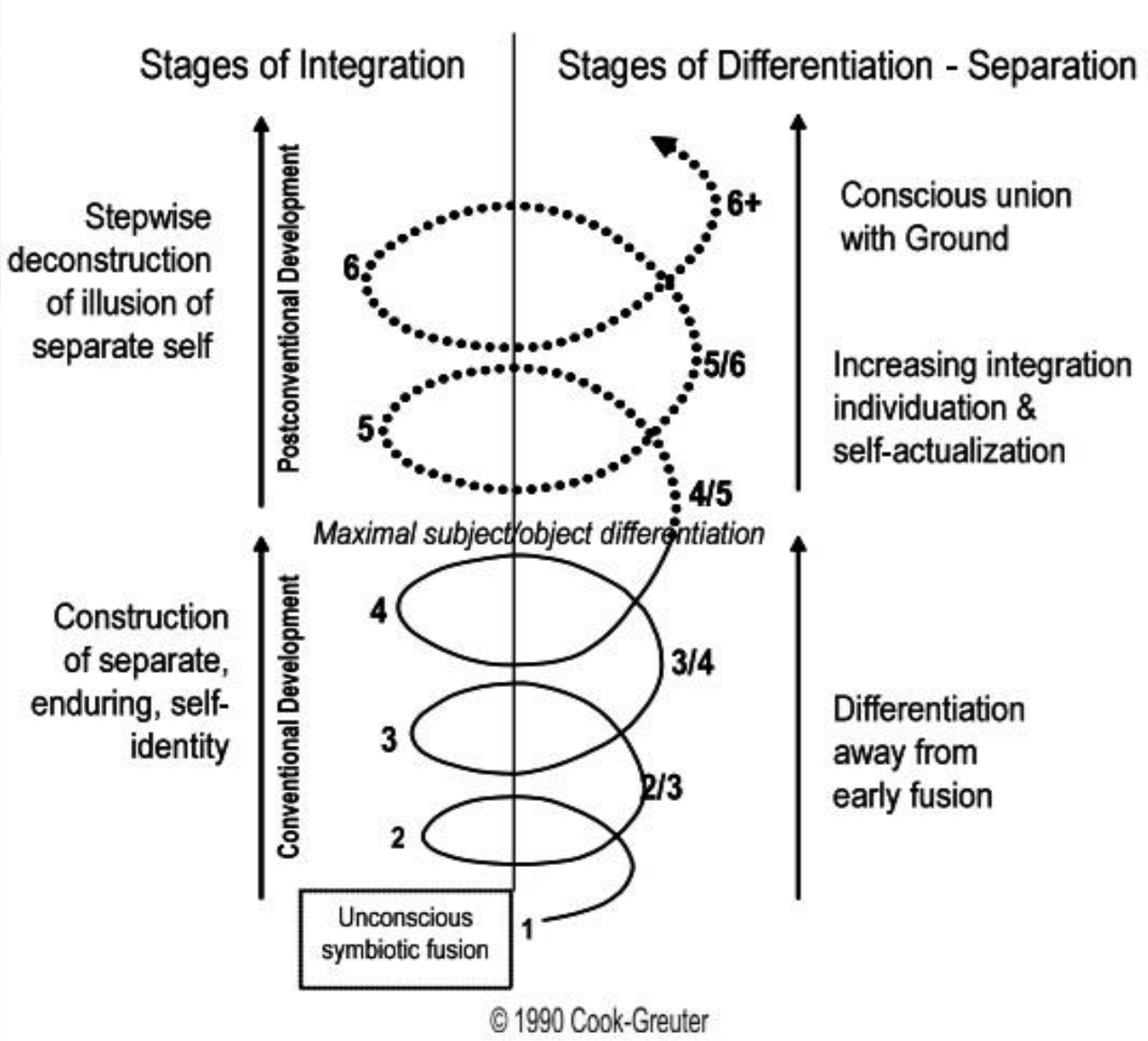

Figure 3. Alternative emphasis on differentiation - integration

2.2. Polar dynamics between conventional and post-conventional

What distinguishes the conventional from the post-conventional way of constructing meaning is the shift from a predominantly "either-or" way of thinking and feeling to the integration of both alternatives. Increasing the ability to integrate polarities is a crucial aspect of post-conventional thinking. Furthermore, we observe that certain aspects of polarity are predominant in the conventional experience of reality, while the opposite polarity becomes integrated as one moves toward a broader and more mature post-conventional reality. Below, we will list the most fundamental of these polarities.

The Part and the Whole: People at the conventional stages tend to orient themselves toward the parts of the system rather than the whole. Meaning is extracted by breaking reality into

manageable pieces. Analysis (from the Greek word analysis, meaning to separate into parts) is the primary mechanism for deconstructing something into parts. A broader perspective and greater orientation toward the whole emerge only in the post-conventional stages, when individuals begin to understand that they are part of a much larger whole. However, the dynamics of differentiation and integration are also evident here. People who have just reached the pluralistic stage often reject the focus on parts and prefer to view only the whole, dismissing the functioning of the previous developmental level. This tendency reflects the "either-or" way of thinking. Those who have transitioned to the post-conventional perspective may initially resist any "atomistic" or "reductionist" view of reality. Only with further development can previous perspectives be integrated, and the individual discovers that focusing on parts is not inherently detrimental, provided it is not exclusive.

Self and Others: The same part-whole orientation can be observed at conventional stages as a focus on one's own needs (part) versus the needs of the group or nation (whole). In any case, the inclusion of others is limited to those who belong to "my group" and manifests as an "us-versus-them" attitude, with firmly defined boundaries. Integration at the post-conventional level occurs with the realization that we are all far more interdependent than previously understood. The stage of autonomy is the first post-conventional stage where there is full awareness of the complex interdependence of self and others, as well as of parts and the whole.

External - Internal, Subjective - Objective: In the early conventional stages, expression is concrete and action-based. The emphasis is on what is external and visible. At the stages of self-awareness and conscientiousness, belief in scientific objectivity becomes particularly important. People at the self-awareness stage focus on expertise and skills rather than the inner life (one might question whether, in general, the ego development stage in academic psychology is stuck at this level). Truth is external and is investigated through external authorities. Although a serious interest in objective self-knowledge can also be observed at the stage of conscientiousness, inner exploration truly begins at the pluralistic stage. Only then do individuals become aware of their cultural conditioning and recognize the limitations of their own objectivity. In the later post-conventional stages, a growing awareness of internal contradictions and paradoxes aligns with the recognition of contradictions in external systems and between internal and external realities.

Short-term - Long-term, Linear - Non-linear: The short-term perspective dominates conventional stages and leads to reactive problem-solving. Long-term consequences and a systemic approach are not fully addressed. This was previously mentioned when discussing the temporal dimension of object wholeness—the ability to view one’s life as a whole, in continuity, through the past, present, and future. A preference for short-term problem-solving leads to reliance on common-sense reasoning and a focus on linear causality. In contrast, a post-conventional perspective allows for the discovery of non-linear relationships and circular causality. It diminishes the need for cognitive closure, defined action, and predictability. At the autonomy stage and beyond, long-term goals and the impact on the well-being of future

generations become more important. Actions can then be designed with consideration of multiple timeframes, levels of impact, and varying contexts.

Absolute - Relative: People at the stage of conscientiousness are capable of holding multiple perspectives and understanding complex systems. However, the focus remains on objective descriptions and the discovery of fundamental, absolute laws of nature and regularities in human behavior. In the post-conventional stages, a new sense of freedom from absolutist thinking emerges. The emphasis shifts to the diversity and relativity of experience, perspectives, and multiple ways of being human. When taken to an extreme, this may lead to the conclusion that no point of view is better than another—that "everything is relative" (a position often associated with postmodernism). The integration that follows absolute relativism occurs at the autonomy stage and beyond. At this stage, despite recognizing general uncertainty, a person can and must make well-founded decisions, justifying them based on several criteria. These include, but are not limited to, ethical principles and clear ideas about what is needed for the system, as well as consideration of the short-term and long-term impacts of a particular course of action.

All of the above polarities play a role at each stage, but the authors provide a broader pattern that helps define and characterize the distinction between conventional and post-conventional ways of constructing meaning. Of course, preferences for basic polarities alone cannot determine an individual's level of ego development. It requires the presence of numerous otherindicators that collectively contribute to the assessment of one's specific worldview.

3. Polarities through stages of development

At each stage of development, we can observe how individuals manage the phenomenon of polarity and its dynamics. Regardless of the stage of development we are in, we can, either consciously or unconsciously, attach ourselves to one polarity, unaware that we are excluding the other. Our current perspective provides us with a sense of self and the security that comes from adhering to a specific set of clear values.

As we outgrow the limitations of a particular stage, we begin to recognize the value of the opposite polarity, which becomes more important in the next stage of development. Upon entering a new stage, we often consciously reject the polarity that we favored in the previous stage because we have become aware of its limitations and negative aspects. We are motivated by the advantages of exploring a new perspective and the desire to integrate new insights into what we deem important.

Table 1 (Cook-Greuter, 1985) lists typical polarities that form the basis of experience at various stages of development. For each polarity, one can identify a preferred polarity, either consciously or unconsciously, as well as the opposite polarity, which has been neglected or rejected. This rejection often occurs due to an inability to recognize the potential usefulness of the opposite polarity or out of fear of its perceived negative aspects.

Table 1. Accepted and neglected genders at different stages of ego development - Conventional stages

Stage	Accepted polarity	Unaccepted polarity
Self-protective	Own interests, needs Action Externalizing responsibility	The needs and interests of others Thinking/reflection, planning. Taking responsibility
Conformist	Others (care) "We" External features Permissiveness, obedience Standards/rules	Self (care) "They" Internal qualities Assertiveness Context/flexibility
Self-conscious	Received knowledge Assimilation Advocating Unilateralities/my way Productivity	Reconsidered knowledge Thinking Research Cooperation/ways of others Effectiveness (quality)
Conscientious	Planned Linear causality Orientation to the future Insight, prudence Objectively	Spontaneous, emerging Nonlinear interdependence Here and now Intuition Subjectively

With the transition from conventional to post-conventional stages, the capacity to "see both sides" of polarity increases significantly. The integration of various polarities is a key aspect of the *autonomous level*. However, subtle preferences still persist, influenced by the value placed on an integrative perspective and the recognition of the limitations inherent in earlier, partial views. This can lead to a reluctance or inability to appreciate the value of previous perspectives. The last two polarities in the table below are typically not recognized by individuals at the autonomous level (Table 2, Cook-Greuter, 1985).

Table 2. Accepted and neglected polarity at different stages of ego development - postconventional stages

Stage	Accepted polarity	Unaccepted polarity
Pluralistic	Horizontally Decision making by consensus To be Gratefullness Personal/subjective Contextually	Vertically Directive decision-making To work Evaluative Objective/analytical Standardized
Autonomic	Overarching System Goals Dynamic Solutions Principles To know Searching	Individual needs/goals Linear problem solving Practicality Mysterious Not looking

3.1. Development of understanding the concept of polarity

After highlighting some of the polarities in adult development, both in general and at individual stages, Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011) present their perspective on the evolution of the concept of opposites. Figure 4 illustrates how oppositions and polarities are understood, maintained, and eventually transcended at different levels of ego development. The capacity to handle opposites evolves from a state where only one aspect of experience, or an "either-or" possibility, is perceived, to more inclusive ways of engaging with opposites, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the very definitions and boundaries once used to create meaning in earlier conceptualizations. As maturity increases, polarities are consciously accepted and integrated. At the highest levels of ego development, individuals become aware of the paradox that the distinction between dualism and non-dualism itself forms a dualistic framework.

To demonstrate this progression—from the initial complexity of understanding oppositions to their potential resolution at the unitive stage—the authors provide examples of responses from MAP. At the preconventional and early conventional stages (self-protective and conformist), individuals are often able to perceive only one aspect of reality, or its opposite. Attention tends to focus on a single side of the experience. For example, on MAP, responses may emphasize only one side of a situation: *Raising a family*—"is enjoyable"; *Raising a family*—"is a struggle." In the subsequent self-aware stage, individuals begin to recognize opposites within the same

whole. This stage marks an initial awareness and willingness to acknowledge conflicting or oppositional elements within one's mental model of how the self and the world function. For instance, a response might be: *When I am criticized*—"I feel hurt, but I learn from it..."

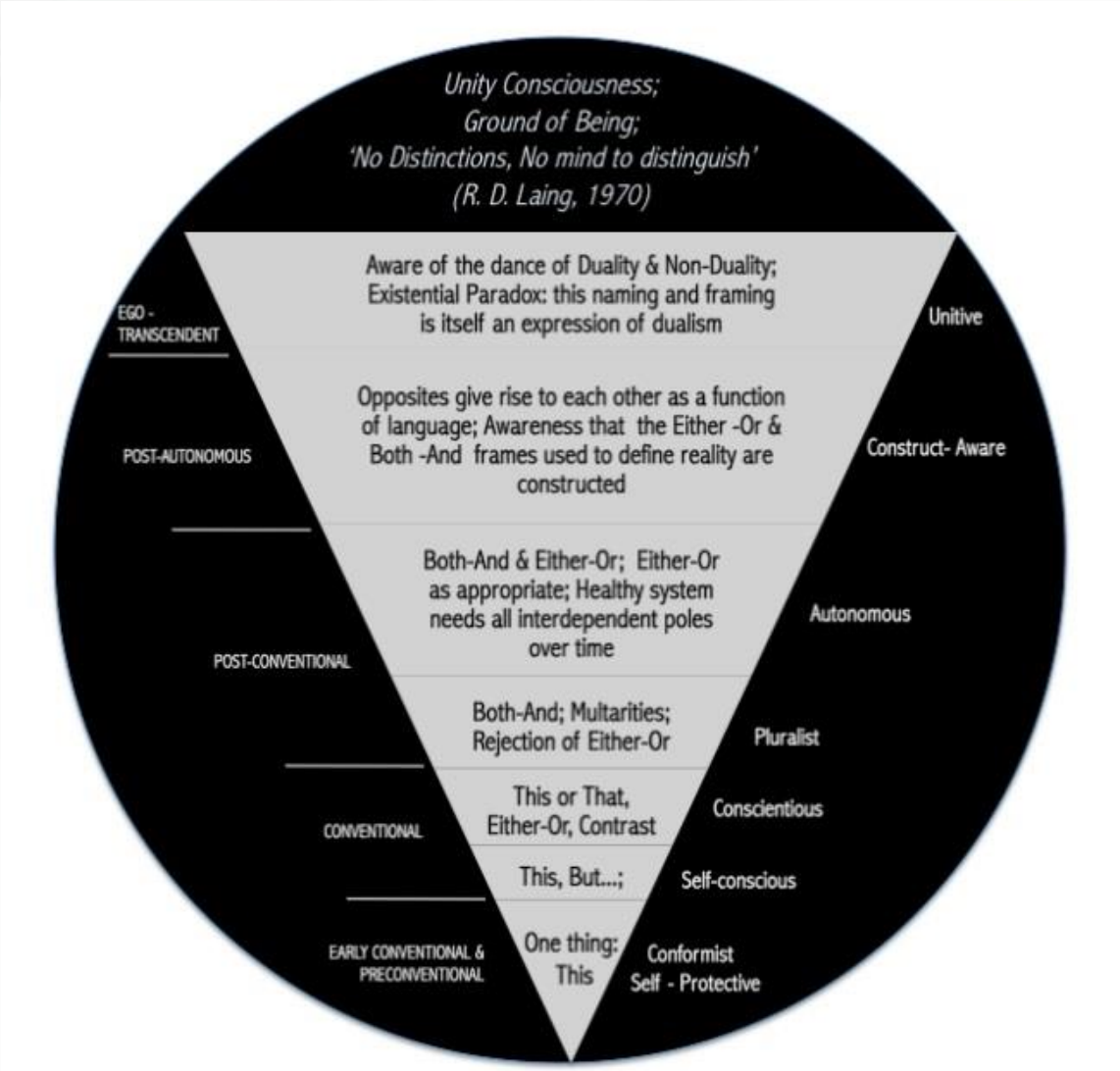

Figure 4. Development of the concept of opposition

At the most differentiated of the conventional stages, the stage of conscientiousness, an initial understanding of the tension between opposites emerges. Individuals at this stage report the need to "juggle" or "balance" different aspects of their experience. The world is still often described in "either-or" terms; however, at least two contrasting possibilities can now be recognized. For example: *Raising a family*—"requires balancing work and personal life...". At

the pluralistic stage, a multiple-perspective approach becomes common. Individuals begin to recognize that, in general, there are more than two possibilities. They may offer a list of ideas, including contrasting elements and multiple viewpoints, each regarded as equally significant. For the first time, individuals become aware of their own evaluation and interpretation of what is important, while respecting both sides of the polarity. Divergent, "both-and" thinking now appears more appropriate than convergent, "either-or" thinking. For example: *Raising a family—*"*requires that women embody multiple roles—housewife, intimate partner, spiritual leader, and adapt to various situations...,*" or *When I am criticized—*"*sometimes I accept criticism, sometimes I reject it, depending on the person and the nature of the criticism...*".

At the autonomous stage, "both-and" thinking extends to multiple levels of interconnected systems. A key characteristic of this stage is the ability to perceive both sides of an issue and the whole, and to choose the "both-and" framework when necessary. For the first time, the interdependent tension of opposites is understood as an inevitable part of life. For example: A good boss… "*knows what needs to be done, but is also able to involve others in making changes and improvements that impact all levels and parts of the organization*."

At the construct-awareness stage, a new understanding emerges regarding how language frames one's reality and how the boundaries we create are not only arbitrary but also useful distinctions. Opposites can now be accepted because individuals recognize that they are necessary for each other. The key to a deeper understanding lies in finding a unifying basis that encompasses both opposites. At this stage, people intuitively sense that the need to manipulate oppositions to alleviate or eliminate tension can be transcended. This is reflected in responses such as: Rules are… "*artificial constructs that we sometimes use to explain (distant) reality or to control (the flow of) events – and, as our creations, they can exist, change, or cease to exist, depending on what we want or need*."

At the stage of *unification*, a person understands that opposites are two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the underlying reality. The struggle between opposites is a symptom of the illusion that the boundaries we impose are real. Therefore, the resolution of opposition lies in the dissolution of all boundaries – including those between the thoughts that create our map of reality and the experience of reality itself. For example: "Being with people..." *is not necessarily dependent on proximity (distance) or the time spent together; we can be physically next to someone and not truly 'be' with them. 'Being with' seems to be more about realizing that the 'other' is somehow a part of 'you' and 'you' a part of 'them – at least, if only for a moment*."
For a person at the unitive stage, the immediate experience of oneness with the universe and its eternal rhythms—expansion and destruction, birth, death, and rebirth, ordinariness and uniqueness, ego awareness and ego transcendence—represents freedom from the confines of language and the constructs created by objectifying reality and framing it in dualistic terms.

To summarize, the conventional mind views liberation, salvation, or happiness as freedom from the negative. However, at later developmental stages, it recognizes the futility of seeking freedom from "pairs" (oppositions). A person at the construct-aware stage can perceive the contradiction inherent in the very desire for freedom and understand how this desire itself can become a form of imprisonment. At the highest level of maturity, as measured by MAP, an individual simply observes the interplay of oppositions, fully understanding their universal nature. They come to recognize both polarities as two sides of the same experience, with arbitrary boundaries between them, where neither is intrinsically positive nor negative, nor more or less valuable than the other. In Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, we refer to this ultimately unifying ability as "existence tolerance" (Jovanović N. et al., 2013).

Concluding considerations

In this paper, we presented a perspective on ego development through the lens of the evolving relationship with opposites, as outlined by Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011). This view offers a different angle on the ability to fully experience the object at an early age, as described by Melanie Klein. It suggests that development begins and ends with this dynamic: it moves from union, through separation, to rejoining at a higher level.

Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011) argue that the foundation of ego development lies in the ability to assign meaning to our experiences in an increasingly complex and appropriate manner. As we name, interpret, and assign value to our experiences, and as we begin to perceive what was previously unseen, our worldview expands. The continuous capacity to renew our perspectives, question our assumptions, reevaluate our interpretations, and reframe our experience of reality in a more comprehensive way is at the heart of the developmental process. More specifically, becoming aware of the value and utility of previously less valued opposites provides us with a powerful tool for broadening our perspective. This ability is also one of the key foundations of psychodynamic psychotherapy methods. Working with polarities helps clients recognize the interdependence of elements that were previously separated in their earlier conceptions. One of the primary developmental tasks in psychotherapy is to include and integrate what was previously rejected, and to incorporate the opposite of what was once privileged.

Insights into ego development from research outside of psychotherapy can significantly supplement our understanding of psychological development. These insights help illuminate the stages of development and provide clarity on what developmental psychologist Vygotsky (1993) refers to as "the zone of proximal development." When we understand where we are headed and the "stations" along the way, we are better equipped to guide those in their developmental journey.

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