One Step Back, Two Steps Forward: Fallback in Human and Leadership Development

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A research study undertaken with six key thinkers in the fields of human and leadership development reveals fallback as a developmental reality and potential factor in developmental transformation. Extending our burgeoning understanding of fallback beyond individuals, to groups, organizations, and societies is essential to understanding the implications of human development to leadership development. This research may inform the design of environments that embrace the full complexity of humans and create the conditions under which the highest levels of development may be fostered – a pivotal factor in the exercise of leadership and the cultivation of a more civilized and generative society.

INTRODUCTION

Stage development theory has heretofore conceptualized human development as a forward-moving progression of meaning-making, one which has been likened to steps up a ladder. The theory accounts for the inclusion of all stages of development through which one has already progressed as part of one's overall meaning-making structure. However, stage development theory does not explicitly address the phenomenon of individuals making meaning, not by choice, from a stage of development that is less complex than the meaning-making capacity that one would expect based on an individual's measured center-of-gravity stage – a phenomenon that has been referred to as *temporary regression* (McCallum, 2008) or *fallback* (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Cook-Greuter & Soulen, 2007; Torbert, 2004; Torbert, Livne-Tarandach, Herdman-Barker, Nicolaides, & McCallum, 2008).

Yet, the phenomenon of fallback in human development seems to be one that is universally experienced. In excluding the occurrence of unchosen earlier meaning-making than that which one is capable, the existing stage development theory denies the full lived experience of human beings. The research described herein explores the phenomenon of fallback in human development through the framework of constructive-development and stage development theories through explorations with six key thinkers in the fields of human development and leadership development. In so doing, this research 1) explicitly acknowledges the presence of fallback, thereby making constructive-development theory more nuanced and accurate; 2) considers the paradoxically positive role fallback may play in both the lived experience of developmental expression and in developmental theory; and 3) makes clear why an understanding of fallback is crucial to creating an environment in which both the development of the person and of the person's capacity to exercise leadership can flourish, and is integral to preparing leaders who are able to address the increasing complexities of present and future communities of practice.

BACKGROUND

Constructive-development theory has provided the foundation for several models of human development, many of which are based on stage development theory, which posits that individuals move through different developmental stages over the course of their lives (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Cook-Greuter & Soulen, 2007; Kegan, 1982; Loevinger, 1997; Torbert, 1991, 1994, 2004, 2010). A review of literature on the leading stage theories concluded that most research has focused on exploring stages and their behavioral correlates, but little work has been done on *how* individuals move between stages (McCauley, Drath, Palus, Connor, & Baker, 2006).

Stage theory has primarily been conceived of as a linear and unidirectional transition from one stage to the next, which encompasses all earlier stages (McCauley et al., 2006). The theory does allow for consciously accessing and choosing to act from a stage through which one has already transitioned. However, limited research has begun to show that developmental movement, while primarily forward-moving, does involve unconscious fallback to earlier developmental stages in certain circumstances, and this fallback to an earlier stage of meaning-making may prompt learning that can lead to developmental growth (McCallum, 2008). A more detailed explanation of the theoretical framework of constructive-development theory and stage development follows in the next section.

Constructive-Development Theory and Human Development

Constructive-development theory proposes that context is paramount in the construction of meaning (McCauley et al., 2006). *Constructive* as defined by Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) means that "humans create a subjective understanding of the world that shapes their experiences as opposed to their directly experiencing an objective 'real' world" (p. 650). The individual's construction of meaning is influenced by both external and internal factors including one's physical environment, one's own actions, behaviors, and emotions, and one's interaction with other individuals. One's subjective construction of meaning cannot be separated from the environment it is constructed within, nor can one's human development.

Development is the expansion in people's abilities to reflect on and understand their personal and interpersonal worlds made possible by increasing differentiation of one's self from others and integration of the undifferentiated view into a complex and encompassing view (McCauley et al., 2006). As individuals transition from one stage to the next, the way in which they know the world broadens and leads to a qualitative transition in meaning-making and complexity (London & Maurer, 2004).

Through constructive-development, there is a transition from a focus on looking out for one's self in the earliest stages to interpersonal connections and mutuality in the later stages. As an individual transitions to a more comprehensive stage, the prior stage is included, and one's capacity to process more complex information and scenarios is enhanced (McCauley et al., 2006). The theory's focus is on humans developing beyond their current capacity to make meaning of the world.

Several developmental theorists have articulated largely consistent, yet slightly nuanced approaches to the theory with divergence around nomenclature (*stages*, *orders*, *action logics*), the number and categories of developmental stages, and ways of describing the transition between developmental levels. Robert Kegan's (1982) work expands upon the cognitive development theory of Jean Piaget whose research focused largely on development through childhood. Susanne Cook-Greuter's (Cook-Greuter, 2000, 2004; Cook-Greuter & Soulen, 2007) and William R. Torbert's (Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Torbert, 1976, 1991, 1994, 2004; Torbert et al., 2008) research has primarily focused on the articulation of the later, more complex, developmental stages.

Of all of these developmental theorists whose primary focus has been on adult development, only Torbert has conducted empirical research focused on how a leader's developmental stage influences his or her ability to cultivate organizational transformation successfully, and how an organization's stage of development influences its ability to cultivate developmental transformation in its managers (Rooke & Torbert, 1998, 2005; Torbert, 1991, 2004). Torbert (2004) refers to each stage of development as an *action logic* and defines this term as "an overall strategy that so thoroughly informs our experience that we cannot see it" (p. 66). Throughout this paper, *stage* and *action logic* are used interchangeably.

I have selected Torbert's conceptual framework to explain constructive-development theory in greater detail given his research focus on the later stages of development and on the relationship between human development, leader development, and organizational development. This focus is helpful given my particular interest in the connections between human development and leadership development, and the research that indicates that it is at the post-conventional stages of development that individuals are more capable of effectively exercising leadership (Rooke & Torbert, 1998, 2005; Torbert, 1991, 2004). The primary action logics that order Torbert's theory are detailed next.

Action Logics Described

Torbert's theory of human development consists of eight primary developmental action logics that are categorized as either *pre-conventional*, *conventional*, or *post-conventional* (Torbert, 2004) (see Table 1). The majority of the population operates from a center-of-gravity action logic in the conventional category (Cook-Greuter, 2004). One's center-of-gravity is defined as "the most complex meaning making system, perspective, or mental model [that one has] mastered" (Cook-Greuter, 2004, p. 277). The conventional action logics are those through which individuals tend to progress earlier in life following their development from the pre-conventional *Opportunist*, through pre-pubescence, the teenage years, and adulthood. These conventional or *formal* action logics are identified as *Diplomat*, *Expert*, and *Achiever* and are marked by an acceptance of norms, structures, and relationships as given and impervious to an individual's own influence (Torbert, 2004). Most individuals operating from a conventional developmental level interpret their experience through a lens of taking existing conventions, norms, laws, and institutional structures for granted, rather than recognizing the possibility of acting in ways that can reconstruct such structures.

It is in the later, post-conventional or *post-formal* developmental stages that the simultaneous holding of facts, self-action, and self and other thoughts and feelings can be experienced (Torbert, 1994). The post-conventional action logics include the *Individualist*, *Strategist*, *Alchemist,* and *Ironist*. At these post-conventional action logics, individuals begin to recognize that pre-established structures are experienced differently by different individuals with varying ways of making meaning, and that individuals not only shape the way they see conventions and structures, but can also directly influence these conventions and structures (Torbert, 2004).

The action logics are not predicated on a person's age, and there's no guarantee that even through mature adulthood one will have transitioned through all of the conventional action logics. In fact, very few individuals operate from the post-conventional action logics, making meaning of the world in a way that privileges their ability to influence it. Unlike development through pre-conventional and conventional action logics, which, at least in the case of the earlier action logics, seems to take place fairly automatically, development to the post-conventional action logics requires a conscious effort to do so, facilitated by structures and environments that support this growth (Torbert, 2004).

According to the characteristics of the stages of development, one's capacity to understand, empathize with, and aid in the growth of others is directly tied to one's own human development. One's developmental action logic has an impact on one's own motivations and the methods one uses to motivate others through one's understanding of and ability to relate to another's developmental stage. Therefore, it makes sense that the capacity to exercise leadership is influenced by one's developmental capacity.

TABLE 1
BRIEF OVERVIEW OF EACH OF TORBERT'S EIGHT MAIN ACTION LOGICS

Action logic (the primary stage or level from which one makes meaning of their world)	Main focus (of an individual's interaction with the world)	Percentage of adult population (n=4,510)
1 - Opportunist – needs rule impulses	Own immediate needs, opportunities, self-protection	4.3
2 - Diplomat – norms rule needs	Socially expected behavior, approval	11.3
3 - Expert – craft logic rules norms	Expertise, procedure and efficiency	36.5
4 - Achiever – system effectiveness rules craft logic	Delivery of results, effectiveness, goals, success within system	29.7
5 - Individualist – relativism rules single system logic	Self in relationship to system; interaction with system	11.3
6 - Strategist - most valuable principles rule relativism	Linking theory and principles with practice, dynamic systems interactions	4.9
7 - Alchemist – deep processes and intersystemic evolution rule principles	Interplay of awareness, thought, action, and effects; transforming self and others	2.0
8 – Ironist – intersystemic development rules process (Torbert, 1994)	Generating ambiguity (Torbert & Herdman-Barker, 2008); transforming others through own role transformation (Torbert, 1994)	?

Note. Adapted from Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2004). Making the case for a developmental perspective. [Technical paper]. *Industrial and Commercial Training, 36*(7), p. 279; and Cook-Greuter, S. R., & Soulen, J. (2007). The Developmental Perspective in Integral Counseling. *Counseling & Values, 51*(3), p. 188.

The Relationship Between Human Development and Leader Development

    Research suggests that human development is critical to leader development (Getz, 2009; Martynowych, 2006; Merron et al., 1987; Rooke & Torbert, 1998, 2005; Spence, 2005; Torbert, 1991, 1994). It is clear that those at earlier stages of development are only able to approach leadership from certain perspectives given that they have access to only the meaning-making perspectives that they themselves have transitioned through (Cook-Greuter & Soulen, 2007). Those at later stages are privy to a broad repertoire of leadership approaches, which include those at both the higher and lower ends of the leader/follower exchange spectrum by virtue of themselves having transitioned through a greater number of stages of meaning-making, which are inclusive of the earlier stages (Cook-Greuter & Soulen, 2007). Therefore, in order to develop a leader, one must first focus on how to support the development of the human.

    An understanding of what prompts human development at the post-conventional action logics is integral to the development of leaders who operate from a framework in which diverse perspectives are sought and explored for their ability to transform mental models, existing structures and practices are examined against principles, transforming power originates not from an individual but from the collective awareness of the group, personal development is linked to the development and understanding of

communities of practice, and mutuality is the goal. As organizations confront increasingly complex challenges, it is important to understand developmental movement, what catalyzes it, and how it can be channeled in the development of leadership capacity.

Organizations as systems face the same challenges as any other system (community, family, marriage), and must ask the question "to which is it more committed – the present evolutionary state of its constituents, or the bigger picture of the person as the process of evolution itself?" (Kegan, 1982, p. 248). Workplaces that face this decision and choose commitment to the present evolutionary state often lose the valuable human capital that strives for ongoing development. This development and striving for such is the best source of information and resources for the organization's continued growth and for the leadership that is integral for success and change in the world today (Kegan, 1982). Human development cannot be divorced from leader development if leadership at its highest aspirations is to be exercised.

METHOD

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of fallback from the perspectives of six key thinkers in the field of human development and leadership development, each representing a nuanced approach to constructive-development theory's inner workings. Through interviews with the key thinkers in the field, I examined in some cases complimentary, in others contradicting theoretical conceptions. My goal was to develop a theory of fallback that will add further explanatory power and accuracy to the existing theory of stage development while also uncovering the potential of fallback as an aid in the developmental transformation of individuals.

This research was designed to understand how the fallback phenomenon might be explained within the existing constructive-development theory as well as through other theories by which the key thinkers have been influenced, to understand the space where theory and the lived experience of fallback meet, how the experience of fallback when recognized as such might paradoxically lead to developmental growth, and how to deepen our understanding of the fallback phenomenon through future research.

Research Design
Grounded Theory Method

I employed a qualitative research design using grounded theory as elaborated on by Charmaz (2006) and Bryant (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) to explore these ideas. The grounded theory method is based on the claim that "theory emerges from the data" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 32). Analysis is conducted throughout the research process, thereby allowing the analysis of the data to inform the data collection process.

Research Participants

I conducted a series of interviews with six "key thinkers" in the fields of adult development and leadership development. For the purposes of this study, a *key thinker* is defined as one who has done extensive thinking around models of developmental theory that one or several of the originators of the theory created. Another distinguishing factor for key thinker classification was that they have also integrated these models into their own research and application in the adult development and leadership development fields. As a result, they were able to draw upon the experience of individuals positioned all along the developmental continuum through their own extensive empirical research and practice in the field.

I was able to secure all three of the living originators of constructive-development theory as participants: Robert Kegan, William R. Torbert, and Susanne Cook-Greuter. In addition, David McCallum, Jennifer Garvey Berger, and Chuck Palus represent the next generation of scholar-practitioners in the fields of human and leadership development through not only their own research, but their extensive integration of Kegan's, Torbert's, and Cook-Greuter's frameworks in their practice outside of academia. A more thorough introduction to the key thinkers follows.

Susanne Cook-Greuter, Ed.D. Susanne Cook-Greuter is an independent scholar who coaches individuals in personal and professional resilience, self-acceptance, and consults to various organizations and projects in researching and applying developmental thinking. Cook-Greuter earned her doctorate from Harvard University where she worked closely with Robert Kegan. Her thesis, *Postautonomous Ego Development* (1999), is recognized as a landmark study in the characteristics and assessment of highly developed and influential individuals and leaders. Cook-Greuter and Torbert collaborated for years on the development of the Leadership Development Profile (LDP), an instrument that assesses the core human process of making meaning, before Cook-Greuter later independently developed the Integral Sentence Completion Test Maturity Assessment Profile (SCTi-MAP). She is an internationally known authority on adult development.

Jennifer Garvey Berger, Ed.D. Jennifer Garvey Berger earned her doctorate from Harvard University where Robert Kegan served as her dissertation chair. She's a trained interviewer and scorer for Kegan's developmental assessment instrument, the Subject-Object Interview (SOI), and has adapted this research instrument into her own Growth Edge Interview which she uses in her consultation practice to help her clients identify the growing edge in their human and leadership development. Before launching her own consulting organization, Berger was an associate professor at George Mason University in Virginia, and continues to teach and offer workshops at academic institutions including the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Georgetown University, the University of Sydney, and Oxford Brookes University. Berger is the author of *Changing on the Job: Developing Leaders for a Complex World* (2012), *Simple Habits for Complex Times: Powerful Practices for Leaders* (2015, with Keith Johnston) as well as numerous articles and books on leadership, coaching, adult development, and individual and organizational change.

Robert Kegan, Ph.D. Robert Kegan earned his doctorate from Harvard University and is a psychologist who teaches, researches, writes, and consults about adult development, adult learning, and professional development. His work explores the possibility and necessity of ongoing psychological transformation in adulthood; the fit between adult capacities and the hidden demands of modern life; and the evolution of consciousness in adulthood and its implications for supporting adult learning, professional development, and adult education. In addition to his faculty appointment at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Kegan serves as educational chair of the Institute for Management and Leadership in Education; as co-director of a joint program with the Harvard Medical School to bring principles of adult learning to the reform of medical education; and as co-director of the Change Leadership Group, a program for the training of change leadership coaches for school and district leaders. In collaboration with Lisa Lahey (change management consultant, author, and Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty member), Kegan conducted the original research on the development of adult mindsets and later discovered the hidden mechanism which prevents people from making the changes that are most important to them. He developed the Subject-Object Interview, an instrument that is aimed at understanding and assessing the developmental complexity of an individual's way of making meaning. His research and publications on the development of mental capacities in adulthood (*The Evolving Self*, 1982; *In Over Our Heads*, 1998) have had an international influence in many fields including management, leadership studies, and organizational learning. Kegan served as dissertation chair for two other key thinkers in this study: Susanne Cook-Greuter and Jennifer Garvey Berger.

David McCallum, S.J., Ed.D. Fr. David McCallum, S.J. is a Jesuit priest and educator. In 2008, McCallum completed his doctorate in Adult Learning and Leadership at Columbia University, Teachers College on the implications of adult developmental maturation for leadership capacity. His dissertation research, *Exploring the Implications of a Hidden Diversity in Group Relations Conference Learning: A Developmental Perspective* (2008), generated the only empirical evidence of fallback in human development of which I am aware. Susanne Cook-Greuter participated in and provided guidance to McCallum during the group relations conference in which his study was set. McCallum uses Torbert's Developmental Action Inquiry as the principle conceptual framework in his research, study, and consultation work. He presents workshops and retreats, consults to organizational change processes, and facilitates leadership development. McCallum serves as special assistant to the president of Le Moyne

College in Syracuse, N.Y.; Director of Mission & Identity, responsible for aligning the institution with its Jesuit, Catholic mission; as well as faculty in the Madden School of Business where he teaches leadership.

Chuck Palus, Ph.D. Charles (Chuck) Palus is Manager of the Connected Leadership Project at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, NC. As a research scientist, his focus is on how leadership is created and maintained among people working together on complex challenges. Palus earned a doctorate from Boston College for his research in adult development where he also taught in the business school and psychology department. He is lead researcher and co-designer of "Leading Creatively," a five-day experiential program for developing creative leadership, and "Facing and Solving Complex Challenges," a custom program for developing connected leadership. His publications include "Making Common Sense: Leadership as Meaning-making in a Community of Practice" and "The Leader's Edge: Six Creative Competencies for Exploring Complex Challenges."

William R. Torbert, Ph.D. William R. Torbert is co-founder of Action Inquiry Associates, which provides organizational transformation consulting services, leadership development workshops, and the Global Leadership Profile (GLP) instrument for assessing individuals' characteristic leadership style for acting and inquiring. Torbert received his Ph.D. in Individual and Organizational Behavior from Yale before launching his career in academia. He taught leadership at Southern Methodist University, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and then, from 1978-2008 at the Carroll Graduate School of Management at Boston College (BC), where he also served as Graduate Dean (the BC MBA program's ranking rising from below the top 100 to #25 during his tenure) and later served as Director of the Organizational Transformation Doctoral Program. Torbert is the author of several books and articles including "Seven Transformations of Leadership," *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership* (2004), and *The Power of Balance: Transforming Self, Society, and Scientific Inquiry* (1991).

Data Collection

Interviews served as the primary method for data collection with the key thinkers. I conducted six interviews with Torbert between October and December 2011 for previous research I undertook exploring the fallback phenomenon with one key thinker, and one final interview in March 2013. Data collection with the other five key thinkers began in August 2012 and ended in January 2013. The number of interview sessions with each key thinker ranged from one in one case, to seven in three of the others. All 27 interviews combined totaled approximately 32 hours. Most of the interviews were conducted via online video chat, but occasionally phone conversations with no video took place. I used an interview guide approach, because it allowed me to follow a focused and structured schedule of questions without completely sacrificing the benefit of flexibility that the conversational interview approach allows (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002).

RESULTS

The evidence generated through research with the key thinkers led to the following six claims:
1. So much exists in the current developmental theory that accounts for the fallback phenomenon, yet, the aspects of stage development theory that focus on the bi-directional nature of human development, movement both forward and back, have largely been ignored.
2. What is most important in defining the boundaries of fallback is not whether one expresses a less complex developmental capacity through thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, but that this expression is in the absence of all other options to think, feel, or behave differently.
3. Fallback, under the right conditions has significant potential for facilitating developmental growth, and given the increased likelihood for these conditions to be met in post-conventional stages according to the characteristics that distinguish them, growth from fallback is more likely to occur at the post-conventional stages of development.
4. Fallback is part of a mutually-defining term, the other component of which is spring forward.

5. There are five overarching causes of fallback. These include: ordinary triggers, physiological brain responses, contextual "gravitational pulls," challenges to identity, and unresolved trauma.
6. Having a theory for understanding fallback acknowledges the full lived experience of what it is to be human, exposes the myth of consistency and onward and upward development both in self and in developmental theory, and provides the basis for reconceptualizing fallback as a paradoxically positive aspect of human development, which has broader implications for the exercise of leadership.

This paper will primarily focus on four of these six claims, detailed in the following pages.

Fallback Defined

McCallum suggested that the experience of fallback is a cognitive constricting of capacity, in which no options exist. Cook-Greuter in her own definition of long-term or permanent fallback, noted it as a total loss of capacity to reason, to see, to feel, what you saw, felt, and reasoned before. She called it a complete loss of access to the later level in which one is helplessly subjected to the experience. She claimed, "The whole thing goes down."

Palus claimed that what fallback is not, is acting from a lower action logic than that which you are capable. Rather, it is only fallback if the highest action logic of which you are capable isn't working, and you seek access to that action logic, but you just can't get it. In Palus's stories of transformational experiences by participants in his own dissertation research, he noted that the participants felt incapacitated, rendered stupid, helpless, unable to cope, existing in a primitive survival state during which the "machine is having trouble working" and is experiencing "breakdown." Palus wondered what the relationship is between incapacitation and fallback. Incapacitation, a loss of capacity, to disable, is precisely how Berger described the experience of fallback. She said there is a lack of other options, and a disabling of complexity.

I believe that fallback in all of its expressions, not the least of which is thought and feeling, but also including behavior whether observable or not, is a true lived experience in human beings. Further, the classification of the phenomenon as fallback should not be dependent upon an analysis of how it is expressed (through thought, behavior, feelings), but rather on if no other options exist in that moment.

Developmental Growth from Fallback

Fallback, under the right conditions has significant potential to facilitate developmental growth, and given the increased likelihood for these conditions to be met in post-conventional stages, growth from fallback is more likely to occur at the post-conventional stages of development.

The characteristics of stages along the developmental spectrum clearly point to a connection between one's developmental capacity, one's ability to notice and recover from fallback, and the potential for fallback to be developmental. These characteristics reveal that those who experience fallback to an earlier stage of development, and who have a center-of-gravity developmental stage that is earlier, take longer to notice fallback. Whereas, later stage individuals exhibit an increased capacity to notice and acknowledge the gap between their espoused way of making sense of the world and the way they actually do make sense of the world. Torbert explained,

> As one moves towards later action logics, one would expect that the person would become more cognizant of those differences between large parts of one's life, because one's increasingly looking at one's life across context and over long periods of time, not just moment-to-moment.

According to Torbert, when one's center-of-gravity developmental action logic is in the conventional range, one has less capacity to even recognize that one is falling back to an earlier stage of development, because the awareness of one's behaviors and thoughts in the moment is not present. Berger, Kegan, and Torbert noted that the *Diplomat* is the earliest stage of development that would have the capacity to notice

fallback. Additionally, Torbert contended, "The *Strategist* action logic is the first one that really begins to try to trace whether we are doing what we think we ought to be doing in a given moment."

In fact, one of McCallum's findings from his 2008 study was that the later one's center-of-gravity action logic, the more one notices the falling back, therefore the shorter the fallback periods (McCallum, 2008). He acknowledged the irony of this in that it may appear that those at post-conventional action logics fall back more frequently. When in fact, those at later action logics have access to an "encompassing consciousness" that more frequently not only notices fallback, but recovers from it—access that those at the conventional action logics do not possess.

Moreover, Berger suggested that post-conventional-measured individuals have the ability to notice experiences of fallback to various places along their developmental band either in the moment or shortly thereafter. Torbert similarly believed that fallback could be recognized close to or in the moment of its occurrence, and posited that the closer to the state of fallback one is able to reflect on it, the faster one's recovery from it.

McCallum championed the importance of awareness which extends beyond the mind in recognizing fallback – getting to the balcony about our mental processes, checking in with the heart, paying attention to one's desires – resulting in an expansion of freedom to choose to make sense and act differently. McCallum acknowledged that this noticing of incongruence is something that is more a goal and a reality in the later stages.

Cook-Greuter also claimed that those at later action logics have access to more tools to recover from fallback than earlier developmental action logics. She identified a willingness to seek support and an inclination toward self-reflection as two of these tools. Given the likelihood of those at later action logics to seek feedback and support for an experience that reveals one's weakness and vulnerability, post-conventional individuals would be more likely to experience growth from fallback than would their conventional counterparts.

Contexts supportive of development would be those in which skills are developed and feedback is given related to the next level of development. Torbert pointed out that late stage individuals (*Strategists* and beyond) tend to recognize environmental effects on their developmental capacities and attempt to structure the environment to support their development. Torbert explained,

> I think what is true is that only people going into post-conventional stages begin to have a deep interest in [fallback]. It tends to be, in general, too threatening for people whose identity is completely enmeshed with their actual behavior. Where they don't have any distance between the two. And, it ultimately requires looking back and forth between behavior and intent, to do anything with it.

It seems clear that developmental growth as a result of fallback is possible, and where one sits along the developmental spectrum would influence one's ability to not only recognize and reflect on one's fallback experiences, but also to grow as a result of them. This is important, because it highlights how the description of stage characteristics in the current stage development theory informs an understanding of fallback. Specifically, this understanding suggests that growth from fallback, given the later stages' propensity to not only notice it, but also to access their more abundant tools to recover and develop as a result of it, is more likely to occur in post-conventional-measured individuals. Understanding the overarching catalysts of fallback may be helpful in allowing individuals to notice when it's occurring. In the next section, causes of fallback are identified.

Fallback Triggers

There are five overarching causes of fallback. These include: ordinary triggers, physiological brain responses, contextual "gravitational pulls," challenges to identity, and unresolved trauma.

Ordinary Triggers

Ordinary triggers are our regular companions in the complex and fast-paced world in which we live, therefore it's important to be aware of their tendency to pull us into our smaller self. Torbert explained that ordinary triggers prompt a passive digression into more habitual, less strategic, less complex developmental capacities. These include laziness, exhaustion, depression, group norms, stress, fear, tension, crisis, rage, shame, loss, overwork, failure, hunger, and jet lag. McCallum also identified circumstances of uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, and illness as ordinary triggers of fallback. These additional ordinary triggers noted by McCallum seem to also be those that prompt fallback through the physiological incapacitation of the cognitive mind by the brain, which is the second overarching cause of fallback.

Physiological Brain Responses

Kegan referenced brain scientist David Rock, and his SCARF model, each letter indicating a specific threat area: S = status, C = certainty, A= autonomy/freedom, R = relationships, F= fairness (Rock, 2008). The amygdala, where emotion and primitive flight-fight responses are housed, when triggered by a threat to one of these SCARF areas, can override the neocortex where cognition resides. Kegan suggested that these triggers can lead to the experience of being taken over by a less complex way of making meaning, of feeling destabilized and at psychological risk. Effectively, there is a biochemical response to certain stimuli that may temporarily not allow one to access the cognitive developmental tools that may constitute one's best self, one's developmental center-of-gravity.

McCallum noted that the ability to quell the brain's response to these stimuli are the same awareness and mindfulness practices that are also so seemingly important to avoiding fallback, recovering from fallback, and growing from fallback – and the same practices that those at later developmental action logics are drawn to cultivate.

Contextual "Gravitational Pulls"

Palus identified family relationships, organizations, and societies as contexts that may pull individuals back to a lower developmental level. He noted that the majority of individuals reside at this less complex space, given the rarity of individuals in the post-conventional stages in our environments (See Table 1 for percentage of the population comprising each stage). He suggested that these are all settings in which individuals tend to operate at the "lowest common denominator." Palus observed,

> I'm really entertaining the idea that the when [of fallback] is most of the time, and the why [of fallback] is, because we can't help it. I think it's a little bit of a fancy we have to think that there's significant numbers of people spending significant amounts of time at this advanced level, and that it's kind of rare that they fall back.

Several of the key thinkers noted that organizational cultures in the West are often *Achiever* in orientation. This is not surprising given that this is the developmental level supported in broader Western society. Cook-Greuter found in her own research and practice that the developmental norms of organizations can be particularly challenging for post-conventional individuals, because these environments don't appreciate what those at later stages have to offer. She suggested that these environments often cause individuals to revert to what's familiar rather than what's most complex. She noted that if an individual is unable to find respite from the developmental oppression in other areas of life, this could possibly lead one to further regression.

Cook-Greuter also identified communication in a foreign language and a change to one's culture as other environments in which one's developmental capacity is limited. She noted that one feels "clumsy," "dumb," "like a child" when unable to express oneself and not be perceived as one is accustomed. Cook-Greuter pointed to the challenges to one's identity that these cultural contexts elicit. In fact, she suggested that contextual norms in any of these settings may result in a change in the way one presents one's self given that the context won't recognize one's more complex self.

It is clear that contextual gravitational pulls may cause us to shift from an espoused way of making meaning and acting to a lower developmental expression in a different circumstance. The inevitability of the gravitational pull on one's center-of-gravity, particularly when the center-of-gravity is in the post-conventional range, is powerfully influenced by the preponderance of conventional range sense-making, discourse, and action in the contexts which surround us.

Challenges to Identity

Berger, Torbert, and McCallum identified challenges to one's identity that may take the form of major life events, new experiences, and "disorienting dilemmas" as an overarching cause of fallback. Berger noted that major life events which may include unemployment, bad marriages, the death of a loved one, illness or injury often catalyze fallback. She also identified new experiences that fall under the category of major life events (e.g., new parenthood, taking a new job, moving to a new country). She remarked on the paradox of these "rich learning zones," in that these seemingly positive circumstances, those that are often cited by the theorists as catalyzing developmental growth, allow us to be in touch with our full capacities, *both* big and small. It's easy to see how these events, whether positive or negative in nature, could significantly challenge one's identity, and trigger feelings of loss of control. McCallum noted,

> When we are taken out of our familiar circumstances, and the kinds of conventions and supports that prop up our best behaviors, our best capacities, are taken away – yeah, that's going to be a condition that's probably going to instigate a little bit of regression.

McCallum pointed to Jack Mezirow's "disorienting dilemmas" as another catalyst for fallback in the category of challenges to one's identity. McCallum described disorienting dilemmas as experiences that transform or challenge one's perspectives, unsettle one's meaning-making, add complexity, and cause cognitive dissonance. He noted that the realization that one's biases are no longer adequate for describing reality has a real emotional impact.

Unresolved Trauma

Unresolved trauma was variously referred to by the key thinkers as "unintegrated aspects of self," "encapsulation," primary signifiers, and "big assumptions." This trauma, by whatever name, was described as creating a "magnetic pull," "onion holes," "tethers," or "potholes" to earlier stages in one's development. Unintegrated aspects of self were regularly connected to the habitual fallback stage that individuals experience.

Kegan suggested that when trauma happens at a time in one's life when one is constructing the world in a simpler way, there is a literal or psychological feeling of one's life being at risk. He explained,

> People may have a kind of experience, which we could call dissociation. And, the way that you survived that situation was to kind of remove yourself in some way from it… And, it has a big cost, which is usually that some piece of your experience gets bracketed off, or *encapsulated*.

Kegan suggested that while the rest of the self develops and becomes more complex, the bracketed self is left at that historical and developmental time, and that way of meaning is preserved until one is psychologically strong enough to reintegrate parts that were left behind. The unintegrated aspect and its hopeful eventual reintegration is not itself a fallback, rather the encountering of some person or some thing that resembles that unresolved aspect of development may cause the fallback.

Trauma as a trigger for fallback has links to various other theorists, as well. Torbert said,

> I sort of take an Erik Erikson perspective on this, in that he talks about the fact that people don't complete a certain action logic or stage of life – he didn't use the words

"action logic," obviously – that they experienced trauma during that particular stage, and they don't resolve it fully…They become capable of later stages, but they're susceptible if situations resemble the trauma situation…to falling back to the earlier stage, I think…

Berger referencing Kegan and Lahey's *big assumption exercise,* noted that these developmental potholes are often tied to assumptions born in a younger self that later become tethers for fallback to one's smaller self.

This list of catalysts for fallback is in no way exhaustive, and as Berger pointed out, the causes of fallback are as varied as the individuals experiencing them. Yet, there is value in naming them. Further, there is great value in being reminded of them, whether for the first time or the ninety-first.

Naming the catalysts, remembering the catalysts, provides a powerful reminder that complacency is at the door. The value of understanding fallback is in its capacity to remind us that we need to be diligent to our own development, to minding the way we show up in the world, and measuring it (without shame or judgment but with a commitment to reflection) against the way we like to tell ourselves and others that we do. And, a critical component of recognizing fallback is recognizing the circumstances which prompt it in us, which identifying the overarching causes of fallback helps us to do.

An understanding of fallback continues to be, and is perhaps becoming exponentially more important in the contexts of both human and leadership development. The next section addresses why this is so.

Implications for Human and Leadership Development

Having a theory for understanding fallback acknowledges the full lived experience of what it is to be human, exposes the myth of consistency and onward-and-upward development both in self and in developmental theory, and provides the basis for reconceptualizing fallback as a paradoxically positive aspect of human development, which has broader implications for the exercise of leadership.

Understanding fallback is important, because it exposes the myth of forward movement in developmental theory, and makes the theory more whole. Berger explained, "You're making developmental theory more textured, more nuanced, more whole, by describing this piece of the theory that people have mostly ignored. Because, developmental theory is so forward-looking, and it's necessary to also be looking back." McCallum noted that understanding fallback reveals the "blind spots" in the field and paints a more realistic picture of development that acknowledges our shadows. Palus suggested that understanding fallback challenges us in the fields of human and leadership development to think beyond the *Expert* norm we currently fall prey to.

It is important to understand fallback, because naming it acknowledges the phenomenon, allows individuals to recognize and recover from it, and reveals the lessons that may be learned from fallback, thereby making it less painful in the long run. Palus suggested that a theory is useful if people can understand it. Even if not perfect, it helps to frame, to have assumptions and a common language.

Torbert noted the importance of having both a theory of development and a theory for understanding fallback, because the theory helps one relearn how to pay attention and recognize fallback, use this recognition to reframe one's experience, and recover, given that fallback puts the possibility of recovery right in front of you. McCallum also pointed to an understanding of fallback offering the opportunity to reflect without shame or judgment, recover, and grow.

It is important to understand fallback, because it fosters compassion for one's self and others, and offers a long-term perspective on the whole process of development. Palus claimed that understanding the process of development and fallback as a real component of it, allows one to have empathy and hope. The value of understanding fallback in the process of human development is significant. Berger offered, "That idea that when you lose yourself, you are going to find yourself, again. When you're in your small self, big self is not gone. It's just not with you right at that moment."

An understanding of fallback is important to the exercise of leadership for many of the same reasons it's important in the context of human development. Fallback reveals the myth of consistency that both individuals and organizations operate under, helping leaders and organizations identify and acknowledge the gap between their espoused theory and their theory-in-use. Torbert explained,

It allows you to see discrepancy between what you or your group or your organization claims it means to be doing and what it's actually doing…in order to become more response-able at more moments of time. To actually see what's going on and work from that insight rather than operating based on a myth about what's happening.

Palus suggested that developmental theory and fallback as an aspect of it encourages a view of the whole person over time, rather than a moment-to-moment judgment. Similarly, Berger pointed out that understanding fallback allows leaders to see people as growing and changing, not still. She noted that it allows leaders to explore and create contexts and conditions that encourage the presence of the big self. Yet, understanding fallback, acknowledging it as a reality in human life, also allows space for the small self to show up in organizations.

Berger encouraged talking about fallback in teams, identifying the circumstances that bring forth the small self, and explicitly creating an environment that encourages the presence of the big self. Safe environments need to be created in which individuals do not fear exposing their vulnerabilities, and have a mutually-oriented motivation to remain present in the face of adversity and through developmental missteps knowing that there is great value in doing so.

Understanding fallback and its capacity for developmental spring forward is important, because it reframes fallback in a positive light, and in organizational contexts, reframes failure as opportunities to grow. McCallum identified acceptance of failure as ground for growth. Palus noted that at the Center for Creative Leadership, optimism and resiliency are identified as traits of leadership. Berger referred to research that has shown that organizational cultures with a mindset that growth occurs from failure experience greater innovation, creativity, healthy treatment of conflict, and team success. Insomuch as fallback may both be viewed as failure, and failure may serve as a catalyst for fallback, framing fallback in a positive light and treating it as an opportunity for growth may lead to organizational success.

It is important to understand fallback, because it reveals and provides an understanding of the fact that we do not always show up our best, most complex selves. This revelation has significant implications beyond the theory and into practice, on one's self and in our interactions with others. Understanding fallback allows us not to judge others based on how they show up in any one moment. It increases empathy not just for others, but for self, because it acknowledges that we are not consistent in our meaning-making. An understanding of fallback challenges us to be mindful of making those experiences of fallback, learning experiences. It encourages both a long-term view of development and a moment-to-moment awareness. The former for forgiveness and hope. The latter to remind us that development is a process, is work that must be undertaken throughout one's life. This understanding of fallback allows us to have hope in the work.

DISCUSSION

What is the lived experience of individuals struggling to face the realities of daily life, both challenges and opportunities? If the world in which we live is pleading for a higher level of consciousness, of sense-making, of ability to successfully navigate its increasing complexity, how do we get there? Theory and research are only as valuable as the tools they provide to those who attempt to put their truths into practice in real life, day after day. So, how does our understanding of human development and the movement in both directions along the continuum, influence how we show up in the world and in the environment we foster for others to do so? If mutual, connected, enlightened leadership is desired, how do we get there? Specifically, what is the role that a more nuanced, complex, mutual, and connected understanding of human development, constructive-development and stage development theories within it, and the phenomenon of fallback may play in our quest to understand, to test, and to practice?

Heretofore, stage development theory has not accounted for the inevitability of fallback in spite of the lived experience of many that would seem to prove its existence. Berger noted that the number one question she is asked when she presents to groups of people on the topic of human development is related to what happens when development is not forward-moving; when one is unable for a time to show up

with the full capacities that one would otherwise have. No matter how we construct it—as theory or not—it's imperative that we acknowledge that we do go to this less complex place in our meaning-making. Instead of rejecting it, we need to accept it as reality, and explore how to make it useful and productive. Given that the value of a theory is its usefulness, the understanding of fallback that resulted from this research greatly enhances the practical utility of stage development theory.

The implications of this research for practice are many. The understanding of fallback generated through this research provides a narrative that frames fallback as a potentially positive experience, rather than condemning it as a negative one; an understanding that approaches the phenomenon with curiosity rather than shame; that offers an opportunity to grow rather than decline. Naming it, making sense of it, showing that it does involve a temporary decline in one's developmental complexity that has potential to lead to something better, makes fallback something that can be utilized more effectively and makes it less frightening. Positively framing fallback allows one to embrace the small self thereby increasing the likelihood of recognizing it, recovering, and growing.

Contexts and their gravitational pull were shown to be potent catalysts for fallback in individuals. Interestingly, context was also identified as a significant factor in one's recovery and growth from fallback. This knowledge is powerful not only in the shepherding of one's own development, but the fostering of development in others, in groups, and in organizations, in that it emphasizes the importance of context to developmental capacity. The narratives that pervade our environment have significant implications for how we understand our capacity to show up in the world in the best conditions, and how we deal with our inevitable encounters with the worst. The role of narrative also informs the attention we need to give to the stories we tell ourselves and those we tell others. An understanding of the importance of narrative in our experience of fallback is a pivotal aspect of its outcome, positive or negative.

The understandings generated through this research may inform the design of environments: 1) that provide tools and feedback to individuals that may result in quicker awareness of fallback, thereby leading to recovery and development; and 2) that both value the whole person thereby allowing space for the small self to show up, and also create the circumstances for the biggest self to come forth. Creating contexts that embrace the full complexity of humans and create the conditions under which the highest level of development may be fostered is pivotal to the development of individuals, the exercise of leadership, and the cultivation of a more civilized and generative society.

"You don't blame the little seed that doesn't grow for being one that didn't," said Cook-Greuter. I think this is a profound statement of not only the responsibility individuals and leaders of families, organizations, societies, and cultures have to provide the conditions for one to bring their best Self, but also the reality that one will not, in fact, cannot always do so.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research explored how six key thinkers in the fields of adult development and leadership theory and practice conceptualize the phenomenon of fallback in human development. There are several researchers and practitioners working in the field of adult and leadership development, each with nuanced approaches to the research and their understanding of it. While the research I conducted does not include a full representation of all thought in the field, I attempted to include a representative sample of the primary thought leaders in constructive-development and stage development theories and their respective theoretical lenses in this study in an effort to clarify, expose, and reconcile the various explanations and interpretations of the fallback phenomenon. Further, while the number of key thinkers included in this research was small, it was also significant in the context of the field, which is still quite young and rather intimate in its scope.

Another limitation of this research is its lack of generalizability in the traditional scientific sense. However, the goal of this study was not to provide generalizability, nor was it intended to reach consensus. Rather the goal of the research was to generate a well-informed theory of fallback that exposes the complexity of human development. While the end result is not a theory or even a definition of

fallback, it is a theory for understanding fallback in both the context of the theoretical framework of human development and the lived experience of it.

The final potential limitation of this research is my own subjectivity. I have an inherent bias based on my personal experience of and interest in the fallback phenomenon. Without a doubt, this bias affected the key thinkers I selected, the questions I asked, and the sense I made of the data. Yet, my attentiveness to my role in the research, and my adherence to making the inevitability of my own subjectivity explicit, not only made me more aware, but yielded even richer and more revealing data.

CONCLUSION

What this exploration revealed is that so much exists in current developmental theory that accounts for the fallback phenomenon: in the full range of development one has access to (versus one point on a line of development), in the characteristics of each stage, the capacity one has to notice and their response to this noticing, one's desire to continue to grow, and the increasing tools one has to create an environment that fosters growth. Exploring the fallback phenomenon through a positive frame allowed the key thinkers to poke holes in the assumptions of constructive-development. This research brought to light the complexity of both the ways in which humans develop and the phenomenon of fallback.

The discourse among the key thinkers may have been slightly different in the way in which they framed the fallback phenomenon or the specific recommendations for its scope. Yet, the key thinkers' underlying conceptual framing revealed that: fallback does exist, and it can be accounted for in the existing developmental theory; it has the potential to play a significant role in development, particularly with those at the post-conventional stages; and while it may seem to be developmental decline in the moment, fallback involves developmentally springing forward.

Assumptions made by those in the field of constructive-development have encouraged the negative framing of fallback, thereby making it a neglected area of research and discussion. Through this exploration of the fallback phenomenon in current stage development theory, the value of understanding fallback is clear. Even in the absence of a concrete definition of fallback in which all criteria are solidified, we now have a way of understanding the phenomenon that has not existed in the past. It can now be embraced in the field, discussed, explored, played with.

This study revealed not only the inevitability of fallback in human development, but also the potential role it plays in developmental growth adding both nuance and complexity to the theory of stage development. I argue that human development cannot be divorced from leadership development, therefore an understanding of fallback and its role in development is crucial to creating an environment in which both the development of the person and of the person's capacity to exercise leadership can flourish, and is integral to preparing leaders who are able to address the increasing complexities of present and future communities of practice.

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