

Editor's Note: Library managers come to ARL for advice on strategies that will assist the library to break out of behaviors and/or organizational structures that reinforce "camps" and instead lead to more effective processes for managing the library. ARL programs that address such requests are based on the premise that such challenges are best met by library managers who are equipped with a repertoire of management and interpersonal skills founded in clarity of thinking, self-awareness, and awareness of differing views and the perceptions of others. To demonstrate this point, two articles follow that illustrate the kind of management theories that are used in workshops and consultations to help librarians develop the skills to analyze issues and strengthen the decision-making process.

DeEtta Jones, ARL Program Officer for Diversity, writes below about how the decision-making process can be managed to benefit from a diversity of experiences and views. Kathryn Deiss, ARL/OMS Senior Program Officer for Leadership Development, [describes a model to help libraries analyze problems that appear to never go away](#). Both articles illustrate the importance of analytical thinking and mental agility for the people we ask to manage library operations.

Library Decision-Making Processes--Moving from Absolutism to Relativism

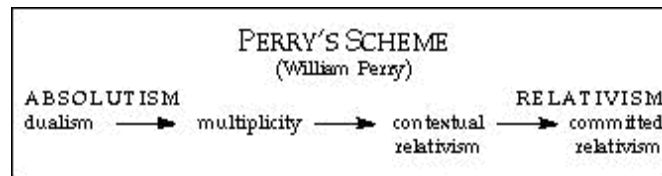
by [DeEtta Jones](#), Diversity Program Officer

The quandary most large, complex organizations face, including libraries, is that we value diversity for the strengths it brings to the workplace and seek to create an inclusive work environment, yet our decisions are typically made as a result of a dualistic process--by one person, or very few at top management levels, based on the premise that there is a *right* answer or *best way* to proceed. In order to move out of dualism in an effort to develop and nurture creative and inclusive organizations, we can shift our frame of reference, allowing for consideration of diverse experiences and options for acting. Frame of reference is not about right or wrong--it is about seeing and valuing difference. This means finding ways to encourage and incorporate non-traditional, risk-taking activities, while keeping in mind that anything less is exclusive. Library decision-makers who value inclusion can learn to let go of immediate judgments, allowing for further exploration and understanding of differing views. This requires engaging in dialogue.

As libraries move through tumultuous times--marked by changing organizational structures, the constant introduction to and necessary competence in new technologies, and the demands of an increasingly diverse workforce and user base--it is important to explore forward-thinking paradigms for engaging the broad array of talents and skills available to our decision-making processes. One tool for such exploration is a model developed by William Perry, an educator and identity development theorist, for understanding decision-making as it relates to individual and organizational identity.[\[1\]](#)

Perry developed a scheme to describe cognitive and ethical identity development based upon the traditional four year college experience, with each stage representing a year in college (i.e., dualism = first year; multiplicity = second year; contextual relativism = third year; committed relativism = fourth year). Since then it has been usefully applied more broadly as a mechanism for understanding life-long development and decision-making processes. The original study was conducted on traditionally aged, upper and middle class, White college men enrolled at Harvard University. Therefore, the demographics of the study group do not allow the model to deal with social imbalances of power; yet it is helpful for shifting our frame of reference about organizational decision-making because it describes options for engaging in such processes. The model can be used to give language to the places where organizations

typically get "stuck," as well as to suggest a process for making decisions that is more reflective of organizations encouraging broad-based participation.



Perry's Scheme

Perry's Scheme attempts to answer the question of how to act ethically in the context of cultural relativism. Each stage is represented on a developmental continuum. It is important to note that the model is not designed as purely linear or one-directional. While we all, according to the model, start at dualism, we progress at different paces through the stages and we move around on the continuum according to the issue or life experience. For example, one may be a committed relativist regarding gender and racial equity in the workplace but think dualistically about these issues in his/her personal life (or children's lives).

Dualism

We all begin here and many of us struggle our entire lives to move beyond this stage, which represents a mindset where only two possibilities exist for any given situation (right or wrong, good or bad, yes or no). The downfall of operating in this stage is that it fails to take unexplored opportunities into consideration and often reinforces the status quo.

Multiplicity

In this stage we begin to see that there are multiple perspectives on any given question. However, we haven't really established our relationship to the differences in our organization/workforce. This stage may perpetuate an "anything goes" mentality because we are not clearly grounded in our own sense of self and organizational values.

Contextual Relativism

We choose to adapt to new situations if necessary and/or if it feels relatively safe to do so. Contextual relativists weigh credentials and view themselves as an incorporation of many things. This stage is often a distraction--we may think that we appreciate differences, but in actuality we do not take risks nor, therefore, test our commitment.

Committed Relativism

Committed relativists make choices with adherence to a particular set of values, emphasizing the process of decision-making rather than the "acceptable" outcome. Acting from this frame of reference allows for peaceful co-existence of different points of view and demonstrates our commitment to creating inclusive organizational processes. The challenge is acting as a committed relativist in times of fear or uncertainty, which is when we are most apt to cling to dualist thinking--it is familiar, less time-consuming than exploring multiple options or including many opinions into a decision-making process, and usually leads to a predictable outcome.

Library Leaders as Committed Relativists

Incorporating Perry's Scheme into a common decision-making process in libraries illustrates the point. When allocating the organization's budget, a manager operating in dualism moves back and forth between two polarities (such as those described in the accompanying article), seeing no other options. Multiplicity involves recognizing several options, but when the tough decisions have to be made, reverting to dualism,

thereby making the ultimate decision without full consideration of all those affected. Contextual relativism, in this case, involves exploring options and acting progressively. However, this is more for the benefit of reinforcing appearances and will only take place if a certain level of safety is predicted. A committed relativist approach to managing library challenges, in this case budgetary allocations, may include bringing together diverse ideas and opinions, asking *and genuinely considering* input solicited from departments affected by the budget choices, weighing the options (benefits/costs analysis), and making a decision. The decision may be one which is new or not traditionally viable for the organization, considering the diverse input which created it. Thus, decision-making from a committed relativist perspective often involves acting courageously.

To be clear, acting as a committed relativist is not about the outcome or decision reached, it is a mechanism for engaging the process--one in which the decision makers solicit broad input and are explicit about sharing the reasons for making the ultimate decision. Acting in committed relativism does not shift accountability nor does it suggest that managers must execute decision-making according to the input gathered. However, it does require that one act from personal and organizational integrity.

The changing nature of the library profession reinforces the importance of being conscious of the mental models at work in decision-making processes. Leaders committed to advocating forward-thinking initiatives must also be committed to pushing the organization beyond dualist thinking and acting. In understanding and making a conscious effort to act as a committed relativist, leaders must trust and be trustworthy, acting with a sense of genuineness and personal integrity. Otherwise, the committed relativist process is manipulative. The end result or decision may be the same as that reached through dualism, but the process is more deliberate and inclusive. The key is to be committed to the *process*.

Perry's Scheme and its implications for libraries committed to creating more inclusive organizational cultures is complemented by experientially-based learning and skill development activities in the ARL Diversity Program workshop *Fostering A Climate For Diversity*, offered September 4-5, 1997 in Washington, DC. For more information about Diversity Program workshops or other initiatives, please contact Marianne Seales, Program Assistant, at <marianne@arl.org> or (202) 296-2296.

Perry, W.G., Jr. "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning." A. Chickering and Associates, *The Modern American College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981, pp.76-116

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[Table of Contents for Issue 193](#) | [Other Diversity Articles](#) | [ARL Newsletter Home](#)



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