

- [Chris Cowan, the Mind Behind Spiral Dynamics](#)



- [HomeGet Started](#)
- [SD BlogOur Thoughts](#)
- [Training](#)
- [People](#)
- [SD Store](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Contact UsWe're Waiting](#)

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FAQ Tiers

What about “First Tier” and “Second Tier” – Subsistence and Being Levels?

Second Tier is a descriptive adjective and an aspiration for many people looking into the Spiral Dynamics/Graves work. For them, to be – or be thought of – as ‘second tier’ is to be more advanced, more enlightened, more aware, more evolved in consciousness. For others, it’s cause for caution.

The word ‘tier’ was introduced with the 1996 *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change* book to represent Dr. Graves’s hypothesis that there might be six core themes expressed in his levels of psychological existence, and that these would repeat in new and higher order forms – six upon six upon six. Graves did not use the word tier. Instead, in his later work with emergent, cyclical levels of existence theory, he called the first six systems “subsistence levels” and the next six which repeat the essence of those themes in higher form “being levels.” (Earlier, Abraham Maslow whose work had influenced Graves and been a starting point for research had used *deficit* and *being* needs to mark a division within in his hierarchy, suggesting a whole new kind of psychology and human nature to begin after that transition. This idea of a leap into a new form of human nature was around prior to Maslow and Graves, and has gained in popularity since.)

The first tier is the first six systems, Beige, Purple, Red, Blue, Orange and Green in the color-code – A-N through F-S in letter pairs. The second tier starts with Yellow and Turquoise (A’-N’ and B’-O’), then on to Coral (C’-P’) and four others to follow as they emerge over human experience. After F’-S’ a third run

through of the six basic themes would begin in a yet higher order form, beginning with A''-N''.

An alternative view is that while there might appear to be similarities, the systems do not repeat thematically as new levels emerge. They lie along a developmental continuum that simply keeps going as human nature evolves and new neuronal systems arise. While the differences might appear to increase, there is no giant break-point; there have been many. The significance of each comes more with the position of the observer than the characteristics of the systems. We can argue both ways and try to teach both views in our courses. Read on and decide whether you prefer to tier, or not to tier.

Although this is only an interesting hypothesis, “Second Tier” has become a part of the central dogma of some versions of the Spiral and a popular phrase in the Integral movement long shepherded by Ken Wilber. It is a powerful meme at the core of many people’s identities, and a complimentary term for almost anything seen as positive, innovative and forward-looking. On the other hand, being merely 1st Tier implies deficiency and lack of understanding, even backwardness and conventionality. Failure is often defined as not being 2nd Tier enough. Success means that it must be 2nd Tier (a reverse of the usual usage where second tier equals second rate). This is a contagious and sticky meme because it’s an easy bipolar explanation; and it is one which we don’t believe has much value despite emphasizing it in the book, *Spiral Dynamics*. For others, though, it’s an article of faith that must be defended at all costs; to challenge it is heretical. The history of the construct and the intensity of feelings it engenders is interesting.

In his earlier works, Dr. Graves envisioned an open-ended continuum of emergent systems, numbered one through eight, etc., or designated with letter pairs A-N, B-O, C-P, D-Q, E-R, F-S, G-T, H-U, etc. However, later in his research, he noticed what he thought might be a noteworthy break point between the sixth and seventh levels, ala Maslow and others. With that the terminology shifted from G-T, H-U, etc., to primes – A’-N, B’-O’, etc. – suggesting a repeat in new and higher order form. In *Spiral Dynamics*, Beige through Green (A-N through F-S) are the first tier. Yellow and Turquoise (A’-N’, B’-O’) and four to follow would constitute the second, A''-N''.

Graves’s idea of six-on-six themes in human nature was only a hypothesis suggested by his data and observations. Earlier he had also looked at groupings of four on four and five on five with “chasm(s) of awesome significance” as possibilities, suggesting a desire to discover underlying patterns throughout his career. Some of our colleagues who have looked at this theory have proposed clusters of three (“triads of consciousness”), while others see a logarithmic progression where every transition from one level of psychological existence to the next is a “quantum leap” in its own right, an order of magnitude shift in human nature.

Because of differences appearing in his data, Graves observed what he called an “incredibly different kind of human being” beginning to appear in the post-counter culture milieu of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These things suggested to him that a great change was underway, one suggested by other theorists and philosophers who had proposed a great transformation in human nature from a baser, more primitive form to one of more compassion, virtue, and “humanity.” The editor titled Dr. Grave’s 1974 article in *The Futurist* “Human Nature Prepares for a Momentous Leap” to suggest this forthcoming awakening and transformation in our kind. (We add that one can argue notable changes occur between any two of these mega systems whereby human existence is transformed; the sixth to seventh and seventh to eighth are merely the most current evolutions at the leading edge. Massive moves between D-Q and E-R and E-R and F-S are simultaneously shaking our world.)

Keep in mind that Dr. Graves was not totally convinced of the validity of his hypothesis, and it appears only in his later papers and manuscript as an idea worth watching over the years. While he found the idea exciting and enjoyed presenting it, he was certainly never so pretentious as to project what third, fourth or further tiers might be like except in the most general terms, and hoped we would not “blow ourselves up” before they could emerge. In our view, the 6-on-6 preference arose largely from his optimism about humanity, the cultural shifts of his day, because the data did suggest noteworthy differences between F-S

and G-T behavior (Green and Yellow in the color language of Spiral Dynamics), and because he'd already done 4-on-4 and 5-on-5 and was excited to discover and report something new from his research.-

As further evidence in support of his hypothesis, Graves began to recognize certain similarities between A'-N' being and the first level, A-N, since both look to individualistic survival, though in vastly different contexts. Thus the designation, A'-N' rather than G-T to suggest the possible repetition of a basic theme and F-S to A'-N' as a break point. On further study, Dr. Graves found a marked increase in "conceptual space," a new freedom from entrapment by irrational fears (not reckless fearlessness) and diminished compulsiveness (desired without absolutes), plus an ability to learn from many sources in many ways. Rather than a focus on having and doing—subsistence issues—he found subjects in this range shifted toward a "being" approach to life with a degree of resignation to coping with the existential realities at hand. (Maslow had hypothesized a similar phenomenon, as had others of his era.) In experiments he found that persons he identified as more A'-N'-like were able to brainstorm more freely, and to process more in decision-making tasks than those centralized in earlier-arising systems. He concluded that this was not due to differences in intelligence (IQ as measured at that time), but to the fading of needs to be impressive, to fear judgment, to fit in, or to find absolute truth. And he believed it represented a change more profound than any previous in human history.

Graves had only a handful of research subjects who he thought might be something beyond G-T. Part of the evidence was that they would look at G-T descriptions and say, 'I used to think like that, but not any more.' He assumed they might have moved on to a next phase; of course, it is possible that they could have regressed, as well. He didn't report conceptions, only philosophized about what a next order being level might be like. He also reported differences in galvanic skin response and attributed that to the possibility of higher level functioning. But since such body awareness/control can occur at many levels within the theory thanks to various practices, it's not exclusive to the upper end any more than the ability to say "holistic quantum consciousness" is.

Graves also hypothesized a move from a sense of plenty in the first rendition of the six basic coping themes to a concern with managing scarcity in the being levels that would come next, a reverse of Maslow. He was quite concerned with the balance of human consumption given a growing population and the resources the planet could offer. Because of similarities between the first subsistence system (survival) and the first being-level system (survival in globalized context), and parallels between the second subsistence (B-O – tribal based around kinship, spirits and customs) and second being (B'-O' – mega-tribal existence in a global village espousing gaia consciousness), he concluded that human nature might well emerge like a symphony with these themes repeating, six-upon-six-upon six up to the limits of the brain of *Homo sapiens*. Then we might become something else as we cycle onward.

That second word in the name of Graves's theory – the emergent, *cyclical*, double-helix model of adult biopsychosocial systems development – suggests an oscillation between an inner locus and outer locus of control, a focus on changing the world and adapting to it. Graves hypothesized that this might relate to brain hemisphere dominance as 'right' and 'left' swapped control in a cyclic fashion. Although the validity of this is still an open question, *if* we want to try and differentiate a first phase of *Homo sapiens* from a second, a factor *might* be a more whole-brain way of thinking rather than heavy dominance by either left or right – more complex neuronal connections. This more holistic and cross-linked brain could explain some apparent differences between people and their conceptions of their worlds. The tests of this hypothesis lie in the neurosciences and understanding how Graves-like levels relate to our organismic brain, in cognitive psychology, and in philosophy.

To tier, or not to tier?

Whether the "tier" hypothesis is solid or not is yet to be established since an upcoming great transformation in human nature was a familiar idea in Graves's day, as it had been for centuries before and has been ever since. Indeed, it might be a notion wired into our brains that we can overcome our baser nature and become truly compassionate and aware in our universe. In our view, over-attention to first

tier/second tier differences often injects more confusion than clarity into analysis since it leads to broad over-generalizations, becoming both a monster and red herring. That said, we teach both approaches to our students since there are merits to both perspectives.

The following remarks from Dr. Graves in *The Never Ending Quest* suggest the open-ended nature of the theory:

“And finally, there is the need to distinguish conceptually between certain gross classes of levels, between the levels of the first spiral of psychosocial development and those levels that appear later in psychological time. The first six together I will call THE SUBSISTENCE LEVEL SYSTEMS. Those of the second spiral I will name BEING LEVEL I SYSTEMS. Those of later spirals, should they come to be, would be designated as BEING LEVEL II SYSTEMS, BEING LEVEL III SYSTEMS, etc.”

From this it is clear that neither the Spiral model nor Graves aims for a state of ultimate “self-actualization” or completeness of consciousness; no pointy top for the pyramid or godlikeness. Some people have been suggesting a “goal” for the emergent process and a finish to the process of awakening. Others see themselves as perching on higher levels and, in turn, use ‘tierism’ as a rather arrogant means to look down and sort lesser mortals into classes inferior to themselves. It has, in fact, become a meme.

Be cautious because tierism is a very powerful and ego involving meme at the core of many peoples’ identities, an article of faith which must be defended at all costs. Indeed, “Second Tier” has become a part of the central dogma of some derivatives of the Spiral Dynamics approach. It seems that “Second Tier” is now equivalent to a grade of A; it’s the compliment of choice, except for those who aspire to being third tier. “First Tier” has become a pejorative and a put-down suggesting deficiency, ordinariness, and lack of understanding. Failure is often defined as not being Second Tier enough. Success means that it must be Second Tier.

Recognize that this tierist attitude misses the point of congruency – that systems are neither bad nor good in their own right; that it is fit between circumstances and conceptualization that matters – good alignment between Helix 1 and Helix 2. While “higher” levels do offer more explanatory power and complexity for the long run, that doesn’t make them most effective in the short run. Sometimes, simpler is better for now.

All of this to say that putting much emphasis on first tier, second tier distinctions may be following a false —or at least relatively unimportant—trail, and that projecting future tiers is at worst an exercise in hubris, at best something better left up to pundits and philosophers. We suggest concentrating on a more functional human spiral rather than becoming too distracted by ‘tierism’.

What can happen with tierism?

The ‘tier-anical’ view often assigns superiority and spiritual cleverness to the “second tier” and relegates the first tier to second-rate status, creating categories for greater and lesser mortals with the second tier nearer to transcendent being. It’s an almost dichotomous perspective that is far from the intent of the theory which grants strengths to each level because each is appropriate and useful in its context. This over-reaching approach sometimes rings of stretched D-Q (Blue) aspirations and the search for saintliness and salvation, along with aspirational E-R (Orange) delusion of a universe revolving around the self, focused on an ultimate “personal best,” all couched in post-New Age lingo and transcendent egotism.

While we agree with Dr. Graves that higher levels offer more possibilities than lower levels, and that getting higher-level thinking into government and education is a laudable goal, that is not to say that healthy, effective expressions of all the systems aren’t desirable, or that many problems can’t be solved congruently throughout the spiral: D with Q, E with R, F with S, etc. The caveat is that the expressions be constructive, open, and healthy.

As we’ve said, being recognized as ‘second tier’ has become a core identity for many devout members of

the virtual Church of the Spiral who take this stuff (and themselves) terribly seriously. Heresy or challenges to their self-designated status is as unwelcome there as in the inquisitors' Rome. Many are quite sincere in their belief that more 'Second Tier' thinking is imperative, and that anything which might attenuate enthusiasm for it is destructive because time is short. Yet few seem capable of explaining what 'Second Tier' means to them beyond the usual 'that it includes all the previous levels and can see more clearly.' Often, definitions seem to confuse open-state thinking and open-mindedness with elevation on the Spiral, thereby missing the characteristics which are already present at effective, decent renditions of other levels which need to be reinforced.

And a word of practical caution: when someone displays a need to tell you proudly that they or their organization is "second tier", much less "third tier," check very carefully. One of the markers of upper-end functioning is a fair degree of humbleness because relativism, empathy, and uncertainty are influential in the thinking; self-importance, much less narcissistic grandiosity, goes away. The need to proclaim one's enlightened status might be a marker of aspiring E-R that is well read, or it might be someone whose bubble you won't want to burst. And if a True Believer whose ego is wrapped up in being Yellow or Turquoise lambasts you for failure to speak the sacred lingo of 'Second Tier' properly, don't panic and be gentle. The need to proclaim as either a missionary or a self-righteous critic offers Gravesian clues as to how best to proceed.

Tier inflation – the rush for more

A suggestion is now floating around that the second tier consists of only A'-N' (Yellow) and B'-O' (Turquoise), and that C'-P' (Coral) is where the ego begins to dissolve toward grand unification with the godhead. A whole new color scheme has appeared to explain this. It's not Graves or Spiral Dynamics, though it shows creativity and, perhaps, some wishful thinking. Heaven help us, there's talk of awakening this "third tier" as the route to nirvana, blissful fulfillment, and meshing with the all that is all, even suggestions of dropping in on it—rather than merely an ecstatic state—through drugs, like the 1960s psychedelic dabblers hoped, or meditative practices and breathwork to open the mind.

Perhaps a great becoming actually is just ahead. Who knows what the future holds? But such talk is not crucial to practical applications of the models collected under the *SPIRAL DYNAMICS*® program umbrella, or the relatively optimistic perspective of Clare Graves. It belongs in the realm of quasi-futurism, pop spirituality and consciousness-speak – Tweeting transcendence. Think about it: the Spiral's "third tier" would be the third playing of the six basic themes—the double primes A''-N'', B''-O'', etc.—and that's a long way off since, by and large, earth's nations are still struggling to break from D-Q and E-R impasses, wars and rumors of wars. If we can actually begin to address the existential problems we know about today, and for which we have solutions but insufficient will, ours will be a better world.

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