

## The Development of Intersubjectivity

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### Abstract

Intersubjectivity, phenomenologically understood, is an empathic connection between at least two sentient beings. It is the capacity to apprehend another person's meaning, intentions and emotions. It is not merely an assumption about the other's state of mind, a deduction from behavior and circumstance, nor an epiphenomenal neurological expression. Rather, intersubjectivity is the human ability to participate in the subjective state of the other. Philosophers who accept such a definition, such as Husserl, Levinas, Sartre, and Buber, admirably elucidate the phenomenon, but provide little or no accounting of how it arises. They simply take intersubjectivity as a phenomenological given. Some psychologists, such as Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg, acknowledge developmental processes for intersubjectivity, but are biased to a nativist view. This paper suggests that intersubjectivity requires intense, lifelong socialization, and where that process fails, the adult is psychologically deficient. Awareness of the role of socialization in intersubjectivity illuminates the wide range of intersubjective sensitivity in adults and children; suggests opportunities to facilitate its development, through,

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for example, literature and the arts; recognizes how fragile intersubjectivity is and how it can be lost under changed conditions of socialization, such as war, prison, extreme deprivation; and recommends new approaches in clinical training and practice. Failure to appreciate the developmental aspect of intersubjectivity risks an impoverished definition of the phenomenon.

Cognitive psychology, from the ancient Greeks to modern times, has presumed that individuals are self-contained information processing systems (e.g., Neisser, 1967). The image of Rodin's sculpture, *The Thinker*, is a symbol of individual mental life. Social exchanges are seen as commerce among individual thinkers, sovereign monads. In most Western philosophy, subjectivity is defined as individual, because while the sources, or causes of experience may be objective, experience itself is accessible only to the unique consciousness of the person having it. That person can talk to others about it, but the actual experience remains subjective and private. There is no basis in philosophy of science to imagine how it could be otherwise.

The question arises then, can we ever know another person's experience? From a scientific perspective, the answer must be no. We know the other person as an object, by the same perceptual, exploratory, and cognitive processes by which we would come to know a wooden post. We supplement that knowledge with speculative assumptions, wild guesses, and personal projections, based on past experience, general knowledge of the culture, and communication with the person.

However, since the late 1800's philosophers have proposed that we also have direct inter-subjective knowledge of each other (e.g., Husserl, 1931, cited by Zahavi, 1996). That is, we are somehow aware that each of us is a subjectivity, a fact of life that cannot be directly perceived or scientifically supported. Intersubjectivity is still not a widely accepted idea in scientific psychology, but it is generally assumed among practitioners to be the explanation of how an individual can know the Other, not merely as an object, but as a co-experiencing subjectivity. This paper examines some aspects of that claim, attempting to tie them to empirical observation.

Intersubjectivity, phenomenologically understood, is literally inter-subjective, a relation between subjects (Zahavi, 1996) in which one experiences another's subjectivity. That enables apprehension of the other's meaning, intentions and emotions.

There are definitions of intersubjectivity less radical. Some writers treat any sort of cooperation or communication as intersubjectivity (e.g., Goncu, 1993). Under that definition, agreeing on the price of a used car would count as an example of intersubjectivity, and maybe it should, but here I want to focus, not on the many manifestations of intersubjectivity, but on its core features that make the Other knowable.

### **What Intersubjectivity Isn't**

Some philosophers argue that intersubjectivity is only a concept for classifying behavior. It is not a faculty of mind and has no causal efficacy or explanatory value (e.g., Susswein & Racine, 2008). I find these arguments unconvincing because they conflate the physical and social mediation of intersubjective transactions with the phenomenon itself. If someone gives you a thumbs-up gesture of approval, the intersubjective part is the approval, not the thumb. To classify the gesture as an instance of "approving behavior," one must presuppose intersubjective understanding of the gesture's meaning. So that argument is circular.

Intersubjectivity is not mental telepathy. It is mediated through interpersonal transactions, including gestures and language. But the understanding of such transactions depends on prior intersubjectivity. It is an error to suppose that intersubjective meaning can be somehow extracted from behavior. Behavior without intersubjectivity has no meaning; it is just so many muscle twitches.

Nevertheless, the spurious argument from analogy purports to do exactly that: extract meaning from behavioral observation. A person supposedly infers the subjectivity of another by deduction from behavioral observation. If I see you fall down, I think, "Ow, that's gotta hurt," because I know if I had fallen like that it would have hurt me. Intersubjectivity is thus an inference to the best explanation of what happened, based on presumptively similar biology and mentality. The deduction could be wrong, but that is not the main objection to this argument. Rather, the problem is that the conclusion is a cognitive inference, not a direct experience of the other's subjectivity, which is how intersubjectivity is defined for this paper. Therefore, the argument from analogy is simply not relevant to the current definition. Zahavi (2001, 2011) reviews other logical and philosophical objections to the argument from analogy that render it untenable in any context.

Neurobiological reductionism provides another area of misunderstanding about intersubjectivity. The exploration of mirror neurons (Rizzolatti, Fogassi, & Gallese, 2001) in monkeys suggests a neurological explanation of intersubjectivity. These brain neurons discharge when a monkey performs goal-oriented actions like grasping an object, but also when observing other monkeys or even humans doing the same. The neurons thus seem to represent, or mirror, in a motor discharge, what the monkey sees.

The key fact is that the mirror neurons only fire when the model they see engages in a goal-oriented activity, such as a hand lifting a cup to get a raisin. The appearance of a monkey or human hand, moving or not, is insufficient. It is as if the mirror neurons were attuned specifically to intentionality, understanding of which implies intersubjectivity (Ferrari and Gallese, 2007). Comparable neurological effects have been found in humans (Hari, 2007). Since

the discovery of mirror neurons, there has been strong pressure to accept them as the causal explanation of intersubjectivity (e.g., Blakeslee, 2006; Frith and Frith; 2001, Iacoboni, 2009), rendering the experienced phenomenon of intersubjectivity epiphenomenal, a noncausal waste product of brain activity. But that is not congruent with the phenomenological experience of it.

There are many good reasons for rejecting neurobiological reductionism in general (e.g., Murphy and Brown, 2007), and in particular for the case of mirror neurons (Adams, 2007; Smith, 2011). For example, since the mirror neurons fire only *after* the observer sees the intentionally-directed hand, they cannot be the cause of that perception. The most reasonable conclusion about mirror neurons is that they are physiological correlates of certain kinds of intersubjective phenomena. The question of causality is underdetermined by existing evidence.

Preston and de Waal (2002) proposed a similar, neuro-behavioral, “perceptual” explanation of intersubjectivity. Person A (the “subject”) perceives Person B’s (the “object’s”) subjective state, which automatically activates the subject’s neurological representations of that state. That activation automatically primes or generates correlated somatic responses (unless inhibited), so the subject literally feels exactly what the object feels (presuming germane biological equivalence). The authors rely heavily on findings from experiments involving mirror neurons to support this hypothesis, as have many other accounts (e.g., Iacoboni, 2009).

None of these neurological modelers, however, explain what it means to “perceive the object’s state” in the first place. They ignore, or are unaware of, the circularity of their explanation. It is impossible to literally “perceive” another person’s (or animal’s) emotions, subjectivity, intentionality, or meaning. One may deduce those things from perception, but that

is a deduction, not genuine intersubjectivity. Furthermore, intersubjectivity must be presupposed to accomplish that deduction, which is circular as an explanation of intersubjectivity. Thus an explanation of intersubjectivity based on perception is invalid.

Another area of uncertainty lies in the relationship between intersubjectivity and empathy. Are they the same thing? In ordinary language they seem to be, but there are important differences. Intersubjectivity, as it has been defined here (and is defined by many phenomenological philosophers) is a co-subjectivity, in which each person literally experiences, to some degree, the subjectivity of the other. By contrast, empathy is a sprawling field of concepts, including at least: sympathy, emotional contagion, mimicry, affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and a range of prosocial behavior such as cooperation and altruism (Preston and de Waal, 2002).

What these empathic phenomena have in common is that one individual, the “subject,” experiences or understands the emotional state of another individual, the “object,” who has the primary experience. The definition of empathy then is “any process where the attended perception of the object’s state generates a state in the subject that is more applicable to the object’s state or situation than to the subject’s own prior state or situation (Hoffman, 2000, cited by Preston and de Waal, 2002, p. 4).

Is that close to what phenomenological philosophers refer to as intersubjectivity? It does describe congruent experience centered around emotion, but intersubjectivity refers specifically to the “subjective feel” of experience, or what philosophers of mind call “what it is like” to have an experience. Intersubjectivity engages one’s sense of selfhood, the “ipseity” that infuses personal experience (Zahavi, 2006). It is more of an intuition than an emotion. My

emotions have ipseity because they have the feel of being *my* emotions, not just *some* emotions. That is why there is “something it is like” for me to have an emotion. So for intersubjectivity, we could say that the “subject,” (to use Preston and de Waal’s terminology), has some sense of the “object’s” ipseity. That is, the subject is aware (to some degree) of “what it is like” to be the object.

In some situations, like sympathy, the subject may understand the object’s emotional state without an actual co-experience, so that kind of empathy might be taken as a cognitive hypothesis, not as a case of intersubjectivity. But for a more straightforward case of empathy, where the subject can say to the object, “I feel your pain,” empathy seems to entail intersubjectivity.

In some psychoanalytic uses, intersubjectivity refers to pre-conceptual, empathic awareness of the other through the therapeutic relationship, as in the transference and countertransference (Benjamin, 1992; Dunn, 1995; Stern, 2005). To manage the scope of this paper, I distinguish between such affective intersubjectivity, and the more cognitive dimension as commonly discussed by phenomenologically oriented philosophers and psychologists. Further, I distinguish both of those aspects from corporeal, linguistic, and cultural aspects. All of these dimensions of intersubjectivity are important, but this paper focuses on the cognitive level, to the extent that it is possible to isolate one level. Distinguishing among the multiple dimensions of intersubjectivity acknowledges the complex nature of the topic and follows a strategy used by Husserl and many others (Zahavi, 1996, 2011; DePraz, 2001).

## Intersubjectivity as an Unanalyzable Given

Philosophers who accept a core definition of intersubjectivity as literal inter-subjective awareness, such as Husserl, Levinas, Buber, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, admirably elucidate the phenomenon, but provide little or no accounting of how it arises. They simply take intersubjectivity as a phenomenological given. As Staehler (2008) says of Husserl, the fundamental question is always, “How is the Other given to me on the most basic level?”

Husserl began his analysis of intersubjectivity from a perceptual argument: another being that more-or-less looks and behaves like me, will see the world as I do, that is, egocentrically, with “me” being “here” and other things being “there” (Zahavi, 1996). Thus the foundation of Husserl’s intersubjectivity is a preconceptual appreciation of similarity based on embodiment. That argument runs perilously close to the argument from analogy, which was rejected earlier. But Husserl insisted that his appreciation of the other’s embodied congruence was a direct intuition of co-subjectivity, not an intellectual deduction (Zahavi, 1996). The intuition of embodied co-subjectivity is simply given to experience, he said.

Likewise, Husserl finds evidence for intersubjectivity in the traditions and customs of the culture into which a person is born. Those meanings are not deduced, but pre-existing and given to the individual’s experience. The same can be said for the culture’s language, ideas, history, and values. This so-called “life-world,” in which each individual finds himself or herself thrown, was created by others and thus provides the *a priori* intersubjective context of individual experience.

Levinas argued that the presence of the Other need not be even presupposed as Husserl suggested. The immediate interpersonal relationship itself was so primal for Levinas

that even “inter-subjective” seems too alienated a characterization, as that assumes individual subjectivities standing face to face in some “mirror-like relation” (Hayat, 1999) that must be transcended. Rather, for Levinas, the transcendence is immanent in the intersubjective relationship itself, not something that must be achieved or acquired. The Other is more than given, it is immanently present, for Levinas. For purposes of this analysis however, we can categorize his description with Husserl’s, as both take the Other as axiomatic, without a developmental dimension.

In a similar vein, Buber (1937/2010) took the immanence of the Other as the primary given, but going beyond even Levinas, suggested that the Other is not even phenomenally present because the intersubjective Other (the Thou) cannot be objectified. It is only known indirectly, through vague feels, or glimpses of a religious nature. Nevertheless, as Buber did not offer any developmental account of intersubjectivity, it might be fair to say that he began his explication of intersubjectivity with an axiomatic given.

Schutz, objecting to a perceived intellectualism in discussion of transcendence, emphasized instead that intersubjectivity arises from actual, concrete encounters between people in the real world of language, history, society, and politics (Schutz, 2004). Still, he takes this face-to-face encounter and its social context as the starting point for analysis of intersubjectivity, and does not provide a developmental perspective. (Schutz, 1967). We could, for purposes of categorization, put Sartre and Heidegger in this camp as well, despite sharp distinctions among their analyses.

With only a few exceptions then, phenomenological accounts of the Other eschew a developmental analysis. It seems to me that the absence of developmental considerations is

simply an oversight, or blind spot, in the phenomenological tradition. There is some suggestion that a developmental approach might be problematic, but that idea is not compelling. For example, Zahavi (2001) notes that the developmental literature presumes that infants are born in a state of undifferentiation and unknowing. In such an inchoate condition, there can be no intersubjectivity, nor even any subjectivity, so analysis of alterity cannot be undertaken. That presumed state of undifferentiated unknowing is necessarily hypothetical, and can be doubted on logical and empirical grounds, but in any case, if such a neonatal state exists, it is precisely a developmental process that overcomes it in due time.

Rather than starting with the givenness of alterity to the adult, fully socialized mind, we should examine how intersubjectivity develops over time in each individual's life. Some developmental psychologists, such as Freud and Piaget, have documented developmental processes for intersubjectivity, but tend to be biased to a nativist view. A more balanced view would consider that intersubjectivity also requires intense socialization for it to arise initially, and lifelong continued socialization to maintain it.

### **Development of Intersubjectivity**

Merleau-Ponty (1964/2002) reported that a six month-old infant will open its mouth if an adult puts one of the infant's fingers into the adult's teeth and pretends to bite. His explanation was that the infant is already born with an intersubjective capacity that allows it to understand, pre-conceptually, the congruence between its own body and that of the adult. This kind of body-based intersubjectivity is sometimes called intercorporeality (a term that should not be taken literally, since we do not actually share each other's bodies). Again, this is another case of a phenomenologist taking intersubjectivity as a given, but at least its givenness, for

Merleau-Ponty, is empirically justified in behavioral observation rather than only in phenomenological presumption.

Modern researchers have confirmed Merleau-Ponty's observation. Meltzoff and Moore (1983) demonstrated facial imitation of adult expressions in infants only 42 minutes after birth. Surveying that, and other empirical work, Meltzoff and Brooks (2007) conclude that "...the findings of neonatal imitation ... [demonstrate] a social connectedness that is literally present at birth..." (p. 149). While no developmental process is discussed in their conclusion, at least the starting point for a discussion of intersubjectivity is made scientifically empirical.

Among psychological theories of human development, many promote a discontinuous, stage-like process. Individuals progress through defined stages of mental development, at roughly the same age, cannot skip any stage, cannot go backward, and eventually emerge at some definition of maturity. Examples of such developmental theories include those of Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, Maslow, and Montessori. Discontinuous mental development implies sub-personal drivers, such as biology, libido, or pure reason. In other words, a person's mentality develops to maturity because it must. These are nativist theories. Deficits may occur in stage theories that slow or halt the process, but in general, in a stage-based theory, the developmental process is predetermined.

The alternative, a continuous process of mental development, implies interpersonal teaching and learning. There is no inevitability about mental development in this model. It is up to the society's teachers to teach the necessary mental skills and knowledge, and up to the individual to acquire, practice and retain them. If that process of socialization fails, the

individual does not develop normally or completely. Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory is one of the few examples of this sort of developmental view.

The main argument against the continuous socialization model of development is that the process seems so haphazardly variable that it is improbable most individuals could be successful in acquiring mental maturity as defined by the culture. But most do, so there must be other, non-social, sub-personal, predetermined drivers of mental development, such as neurological or genetic ones. The best bet is that both kinds of driving factors are involved, even for development of specific faculties such as intersubjectivity (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 2011).

Whether mental development depends more on innate biological processes or socialization is a worthy discussion, but the goal here is to introduce the idea that in the particular case of intersubjectivity, socialization is necessary to induce and sustain its development throughout the lifespan, and that in the absence of socialization, intersubjectivity does not develop properly. Consequently, there are large differences in the quality and degree of intersubjectivity in adults. The idea of socialization for intersubjectivity is lacking in most explanations of intersubjectivity, and consequently so is appreciation of wide variation in degree of intersubjectivity across individuals.

### **Categories of Intersubjectivity**

Some kinds of empathy and intersubjectivity are automatic, unconceptualized, and pre-linguistic. Experimental behavioral observation suggests as much. Examples include mimicry, emotional contagion, and imitation (e.g., Meltzoff and Brooks, 2007). These examples involve intercorporeality, a preconceptual appreciation of similarity based on perception of mutually congruent embodiment, as discussed by Husserl and others.

Other forms of preconceptual intersubjectivity involve “synchrony,” the preverbal interpersonal accommodations between mother and child in nursing, games, babbling, and songs (e.g., Stern, 1985). Braten and Trevarthen (2007) call this level of intersubjectivity the primary intersubjective dialogs of protoconversation and imitation. They are a blend of cognitive and affective gestures and responses. Intersubjective phenomena in this category could plausibly be biologically driven, although by no means “automatic,” because we know that without the social interaction of “protoconversations” between mother (caregiver) and child, primary intersubjectivity (e.g., “attachment”) does not develop spontaneously (e.g., Bowlby, 1969). Biological drivers are clearly not sufficient, then. We should conclude that even primary, precognitive, probably biologically-driven kinds of intersubjectivity, still depend crucially on explicit socialization.

In addition, there are higher-order kinds of intersubjectivity that are cognitively and linguistically mediated, and are concurrent with development of the Social Self (e.g., Adams, 2011). The Social Self is called a “self” because it involves self-awareness that conceptualizes itself as the doer of actions and the owner of experience (Lewis, 2002). This explicit sense of self arises between 15 to 24 months of age in humans, about the time they can pass the mirror test (Lewis and Brooks, 1978). A spot of red makeup is surreptitiously put on a child’s forehead, then the child is presented with his or her image in a mirror. Older children will touch the red spot or smile, or in other ways indicate some discomfort, embarrassment, or confusion. They recognize that the mirror image is of themselves. Younger children do not. Follow-up studies connecting the mirror test with the capacity for social embarrassment (Lewis, et al., 1989), speak to its validity as an index of the self-aware Social Self. Braten and Trevarthen (2007)

identify these higher-order expressions of intersubjectivity as “secondary intersubjective attunement,” in which children and infants are able to share and understand intentions, and manifest social emotions such as pride and shame that require a theory of mind, the ability to take the point of view of another person and understand what the other knows, sees, intends, or feels. During this period, socialization into intersubjectivity continues by explicit teaching and learning but also occurs indirectly via peer play.

The critical period sensitivity of the mirror test suggests a subpersonal, possibly biological basis for emergence of the Social Self. The same can be said about acquisition of language itself (e.g., Chomsky, 1975). Nevertheless, we know that without explicit socialization, neither language nor the Social Self develop spontaneously (Adams, 2011). Neither is evident in severely feral children later recovered by society (e.g., Newton, 2000), but they are both partially evident in partially feral children, those who had some, but not much, human companionship, or those whose social isolation began after certain critical periods of development (Koluchova, 1972, 1976).

According to Braten and Trevarthen (2007), there is a third level of intersubjective development that is strongly language-mediated, and also depends on the emergence of a self-aware Social Self. At this level of development a child can tell and understand jokes and can pretend to be pleased with a disappointing gift. We say that the child’s theory of mind (e.g., understanding of the mind of the Other) is well-formed at this point. The development of intersubjectivity thereafter merges with general cognitive development. Braten and Trevarthen (2007) refer to this high-order development of intersubjectivity as “tertiary intersubjective understanding.” At this degree of development, a person understands nuanced dialog,

narrative imagination, emotional empathy, and other phenomena we associate with well-developed intersubjectivity.

As tertiary socialization continues through the lifespan, I suggest that it defines a final stage, a “quaternary” level of intersubjective socialization (not described by Braten and Trevarthen). During this ongoing late-stage socialization and development, a person becomes able to deconstruct language to access phenomena to which language only points. Poetry is an example of language that points to phenomena beyond language. Perhaps all language does that, but not everybody realizes it. With poetry, both writer and reader are expected to look beyond literal denotation, and that is a characteristic of quaternary intersubjectivity.

At this degree of social development, a person can feel and understand more advanced intersubjective phenomena such as poetic metaphor, human rights, romantic love, artistic aesthetics, universal compassion, religious intuition, and principles of justice, to name just a few “advanced” intersubjective phenomena upon which civilization depends. Development of advanced intersubjective phenomena depends more on imagination and memory than on immediate social interaction (Gordon, 2002). During this quaternary period of intersubjective socialization and development, a person may learn to co-experience (in part) the actual subjectivity of the other.

People with limited or impoverished socialization may not be able to appreciate or understand these higher reaches of intersubjectivity. That may also be the case for people whose adult socialization is initially adequate but then changes radically, as, for example, when a person goes to prison or experiences war or succumbs to mental disorder or drug addiction.

The well-known Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo, 1973), is one illustration of the fragility of socialized intersubjectivity.

People who do not have ongoing socialization support for quaternary intersubjectivity may not be susceptible to depth psychotherapy, for example, may be unable to express compassion, may be intolerant of diverging beliefs, or may not be able to appreciate the meaning of ballet, literature, and fine art, even with appropriate didactic efforts.

### **Uses of Socialization for Intersubjectivity**

All four categories of intersubjectivity are dependent on socialization for their emergence and maintenance. Whatever biological or other subpersonal factors are necessary for the development of intersubjectivity, they are not sufficient, and that is clearly demonstrated in cases where appropriate socialization is not also present. In those cases, intersubjectivity develops incompletely or no further in each category. For example, there may be biological drivers for the acquisition of language, but without explicit teaching and learning, language does not spontaneously emerge.

Impaired intersubjective development might also result from truncation or absence of the subpersonal drivers of intersubjective development, as suggested by evidence from research on autism and traumatic brain disorder (e.g., Zahavi, 2006). However, here we are interested in the processes of socialization that support intersubjectivity.

Appreciation of the role of socialization in the development of intersubjectivity suggests that intersubjectivity can be explicitly taught and learned even where other forms of socialization have been deficient or absent, possibly even compensating for deficiencies in the

biological bases of intersubjectivity (Borba, 2002; Gordon, 2005; Perry, 2006). This strategy could open up innovative avenues of psychotherapy (e.g., Perry, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

This excursion into the role of explicit socialization in the development of intersubjectivity is intended as a corrective to the prevailing attitude of phenomenological philosophers who assume or presume that full, complete, mature intersubjectivity is simply given to the adult mind, and fail to consider the wide variation in the quality of its actual occurrence in individuals. It is no good to argue that intersubjectivity should be characterized this way and not that way, when one has reified the concept to the point that it no longer corresponds to the natural phenomenon in its vicissitudes. Apprehension of the Other is, in significant part, a learned skill, and learning is variable.

Does intersubjectivity arise from preconceptual appreciation of similarity based on embodiment, as Husserl said? Well, yes, for primary intersubjectivity, but that is not the whole story. Does intersubjectivity arise from an individual's socialization experience in the life-world, as Husserl also said? Of course, but that does not cover all the possibilities either. Does intersubjectivity arise from real-world, face-to-face encounters with the social Other, as Schutz (and Heidegger, Mead, and Benjamin, and many others) have argued? Absolutely. Without the development of the Social Self, there can be no secondary and tertiary intersubjectivity, but those phases of development do not paint the entire picture of intersubjectivity. Is the presence of the Other immanent in the interpersonal relationship, as Levinas said? It might well be, in a person with no intersubjectively-related biological deficits and who has rich experience in quaternary socialization for intersubjectivity, but that is by no means a full description of

intersubjectivity. We could say the same for Buber's quasi-religious intimations of intersubjectivity.

As this paper has tried to demonstrate, we gather a fuller appreciation of intersubjectivity by taking into account its biological, and especially, its socialization drivers over the course of human development. Failure to do that can lead to impoverished characterization of the basic phenomenon.

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