
The Heart of Equid-Nexus: Building Relational Consciousness through Intersubjectivity

Building Relational Consciousness through Intersubjectivity

The Equid-Nexus facilitation model of building relational consciousness through intersubjectivity is, in part, based upon these theorists and their contributions to the field of awareness of self and others. Essentially, intersubjectivity creates and sustains engaged connection between human and horse. **Relational Consciousness is a component of engaged connection and indicates Self-Presence and attunement to another.** It is the awareness of Self and parts, and the Self and parts of another. It grows through “intersubjectivity”, which was coined by Edward Husserl, an Austrian-German philosopher who established the school of phenomenology (the study of the structures and subjective experience and consciousness). Intersubjectivity represents a “comprehensive emotional, intentional/motivational, attentional, reflective, and behavioral experience of the other. It emerges from shared emotions (attunement), joint attention and awareness, and congruent intention.”

Intersubjectivity has traditionally referred to the psychoanalyst-patient relationship. The roots of intersubjectivity emerged as a reaction to the analyst’s interpretation of the patient’s expression of their unconscious. These interpretations were reflective of the analyst’s individualistic and personal perspective and countertransference, without being informed by the nuanced dynamic of the patient’s presentation. Heinz Kohut’s psychoanalytic self-psychology focused on the “development of the self” throughout the life cycle. The “Training and Research in Intersubjective Self Psychology” explains that he theorized that the development of self is cultivated in the following ways:

- The experience of being seen, of feeling recognized for whom we know ourselves to be, and of feeling understood.
- The experience of being held by a reliable, steady, and knowing other.
- The experience of essential likeness with another, of feeling that we can recognize ourselves in another and feel that the other can recognize themselves in us.

Daniel Stern, a developmental psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who specialized in childhood development, explored intersubjectivity in attachment research exploring the infant-mother relationship. He is best known for his book “The Interpersonal World of the Infant”, in which he distinguished four main senses of self in the developing infant: Emergent self – birth to 2 months, Core self – 2 to 6 months, Subjective self – 7 and 15 months, and Verbal self – 2 years. He also articulates how intersubjectivity is critical to build a healthy self and secure attachment with caregivers. His book “The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life” explores intersubjectivity beyond those of the therapist-client and infant-mother relationships.

Other significant contributors to building relational consciousness are Allan Shore, a psychologist and researcher in the field of neuropsychology, and Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist

and executive director of the Mindsight Institute, which focuses on the interpersonal neurobiology of awareness and “describes our human capacity to perceive the mind of the self and others”.

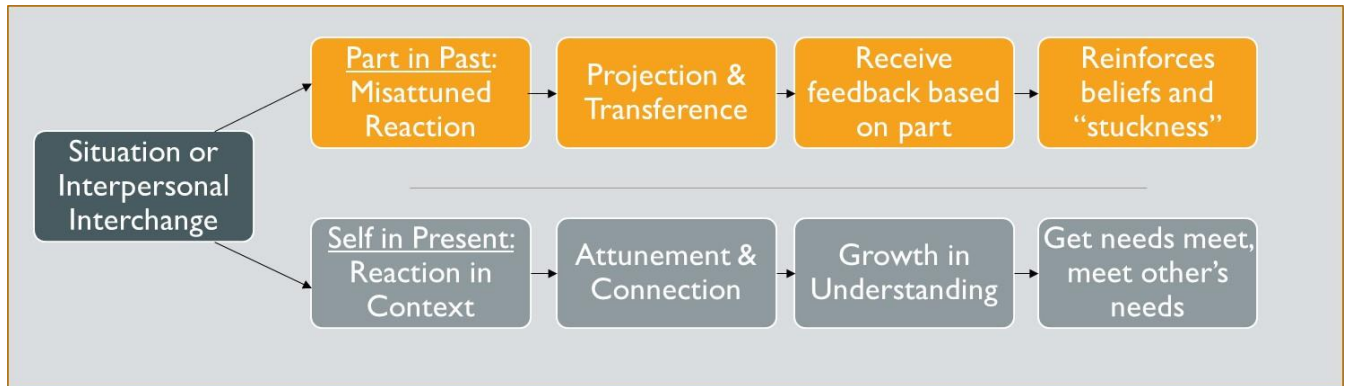
Intersubjectivity is a quintessential component of what Dan Siegel calls “contingent communication”, which means, as adapted to equine engaged psychotherapy, that the client and the horse’s communication patterns rely on attunement and resonance with the other, and that their engaged communication is precisely built on the responses and reactions of the other. The importance of Self-Led communication is embedded within “contingent communication”, as interacting through parts misses the context of the moment.

When people behave and interact with others through extreme parts their reactions are rooted in another space and time within the person’s experience. They are often not updated to the person’s current age or life status. Parts that are frozen in the past are typically younger and have a limited interpersonal repertoire that limits the person’s ability to be with another in context of the present moment. When I was trained in EMDR, the trainer, Paula Merucci stated that “that 20% of peoples’ reactions stem from the past while 80% is based upon past experiences that come to life in the moment”. This makes sense from a parts perspective.

The intentional therapeutic goal is to guide the client into building an internal awareness of the parts that are present and using that awareness to communicate and interact with others in a new, more adaptive way (from Self) within the immediacy of the moment. Attunement is therefore increased, which creates the condition for intersubjectivity and contingent communication.

Building relational consciousness through intersubjectivity can be possible when an individual can heal developmental and relational wounding and trauma, which creates more spaciousness within the system. As parts are acknowledged, understood, witnessed, and unburdened there is more Self-Energy and the ability to create healthier relationships with secure attachment. Courage and confidence in connection allows a person to identify their needs and get them met by making requests in relationships and fulfilling viable requests and meeting the needs of others. Relational reciprocity builds resiliency and durability within the internal system, resulting in an integrated brain-body and mind, and a reduction of “inflexibility and chaos” (Dan Siegel).

The diagram below illustrates the distinction between acting from a blended part versus having a critical mass of Self, that is, being aware of part activation.



The top row details when a person is blended with a part and responds from this part in the present situation. The response is filtered through a past negative relational experience. This is a mis-attuned reaction that can be considered a projection or transference onto another. The other person or equine then responds to the person based upon the mis-attuned and out of context reaction, and gives feedback based on confusion and misinterpretation. When the person receives this feedback, it reinforces their negative beliefs about themselves and others and continues the cycle of not feeling understood or seen in relationship.

Conversely, when we have a critical mass of Self, we respond to the personal interchange in a more contextually-appropriate way and thus can attune and respond in the present moment rather than from the past. This leads to an increased understanding of the other and builds trust. Responding in context with an intersubjective perspective builds relational consciousness that assists in understanding, making viable requests, and expressing and getting needs met.

Viability is an important concept because the needs and requests within a relationship are more likely to be met if they are appropriate for the type of relationship and within the parameters of the current status of the relationship. Appropriate boundaries and expectations are conveyed in the context of the established relationship. For example, when first meeting someone, it would not be an appropriate request to ask someone to use their car for a weekend just because theirs is in the shop. Another example applicable to the horse and human relationship, is if a client has an initial session with a horse with the intention of building a relationship based on consent, but the client expects to ride the horse immediately upon meeting it.

Building relationships take time, energy and a dedication to understanding their perspective. Intersubjectivity may not come naturally – it needs to be cultivated over time

and through a co-created experience. The Equid-Nexus model is the blueprint for this thoughtful cultivation.

Consider the clients you work with for a moment. What patterns do you notice in their relationships? What cognitions and beliefs are routinely applied to themselves and others? What are they consistently triggered by? What somatic experiences do they report? What are their reaction patterns? What is their narrative about the relationship and their role?