Chapter 6 The Sense of a Subjective Self: I. Overview

THE NEXT QUANTUM LEAP in the sense of self occurs when the infant discovers that he or she has a mind and that other people have minds as well. Between the seventh and ninth month of life, infants gradually come upon the momentous realization that inner subjective experiences, the “subject matter” of the mind, are potentially shareable with someone else. The subject matter at this point in development can be as simple and important as an intention to act (“I want that cookie”), a feeling state (“This is exciting”), or a focus of attention (“Look at that toy”). This discovery amounts to the acquisition of a “theory” of separate minds. Only when infants can sense that others distinct from themselves can hold or entertain a mental state that is similar to one they sense themselves to be holding is the sharing of subjective experience or intersubjectivity possible (Trevarthan and Hubley 1978). The infant must arrive at a theory not only of separate minds but of “interfaceable separate minds” (Bretherton and Bates 1979; Bretherton et al. 1981). It is not, of course, a full-blown theory. It is rather a working notion that says something like, what is going on in my mind may be similar enough to what is going on in your mind that we can somehow communicate this (without words) and thereby experience intersubjectivity. For such an experience to occur, there must be some shared framework of meaning and means of communication such as gesture, posture, or facial expression.

When it does occur, the interpersonal action has moved, in part, from overt actions and responses to the internal subjective states that lie behind the overt behaviors. This shift gives the infant a different “presence” and social “feel.” Parents generally begin to treat the infant differently and address themselves more to the subjective domain of experience. This sense of the self and other is quite different from what was possible in the domain of core-relatedness. Infants now have a new organizing subjective perspective about their social lives. The potential properties of a self and of an other have been greatly expanded. Selves and others now include inner or subjective states of experience in addition to the overt behaviors and direct sensations that marked the core self and other. With this expansion in the nature of the sensed self, the capacity for relatedness and the subject matter with which it is concerned catapult the infant into a new domain of intersubjective relatedness. A new organizing subjective perspective about the self emerges.

What relation does this new perspective bear to the already present sense of a core self? Intersubjective relatedness is built on the foundation of core-relatedness. Core-relatedness, with its establishment of the physical and sensory distinctions of self and other, is the necessary precondition, since the possibility of sharing subjective experiences has no meaning unless it is a transaction that occurs against the surety of a physically distinct and separate self and other. While intersubjective relatedness transforms the interpersonal world, however, core-relatedness continues. Intersubjective relatedness does not displace it; nothing ever will. It is the existential bedrock of interpersonal relations. When the domain of intersubjective relatedness is added, core-relatedness and intersubjective relatedness coexist and interact. Each domain affects the experience of the other.

When this leap in the sense of self occurs, how does the interpersonal world appear to be different? Empathy on the part of the caregiver now becomes a different experience. It is one thing for a younger infant to respond to the overt behavior that reflects a mother's empathy, such as a soothing behavior at the right moment. In the younger infant the empathic process itself goes unnoticed, and only the empathic response is registered. It is quite another thing for the infant to sense that an empathic process bridging the two minds has been created. The caregiver's empathy, that process crucial to the infant's development, now becomes a direct subject of the infant's experience.

At this stage, for the first time, one can attribute to the infant the capacity for psychic intimacy—the openness to disclosure, the permeability or interpenetrability that occurs between two people (Hinde 1979). Psychic intimacy as well as physical intimacy is now possible. The desire to know and be known in this sense of mutually revealing subjective experience is great. In fact, it can be a powerful motive and can be felt as a need-state. (The refusal to be known psychically can also be experienced with great power.)

Finally, with the advent of intersubjectivity, the parents' socialization of the infant's subjective experience comes to be at issue. Is subjective experience to be shared? How much of it is to be shared? What kinds of subjective experience are to be shared? What are the consequences of sharing and not sharing? Once the infant gets the first glimpse of the intersubjective domain and the parents realize this, they must begin to deal with these issues.
What is ultimately at stake is nothing less than discovering what part of the private world of inner experience is shareable and what part falls outside the pale of commonly recognized human experiences. At one end is psychic human membership, at the other psychic isolation.

The Background of the Focus on Intersubjectivity

Given the far-reaching consequences of this quantum leap in the sense of self, how did it happen that we have been so slow to come upon the infant's discovery of intersubjective relatedness? Historically, several streams of inquiry flowed together to produce the recognition of this major developmental step. Philosophy has long dealt with the issue of separate minds. The necessity of assuming a developmental point when infants acquired a theory or working sense of separate minds is not alien to philosophical inquiry and, in fact, was often tacitly assumed (Habermas 1972; Hamlyn 1974; MacMurray 1961; Cavell 1984). Psychology, on the other hand, has been slower to deal with this issue in these terms, largely because the study of the development of subjective experience with persons, in comparison with the study of the development of knowledge of things, has been relatively neglected in recent academic psychology. Only now is the pendulum starting to swing back the other way, and pioneers such as Baldwin (1902), who firmly designated subjective experience of the self and other as the starting units for a developmental psychology, are being rediscovered in this country, as is Wallon (1949) in Europe.

Psychoanalysis has always been intensely concerned with the subjective experience of individuals. Except in the very special case of therapeutic empathy, however, it has not conceptualized intersubjective experience as a dyadic event, and this conceptualization is necessary to a generic view of intersubjectivity. It is also possible that the dominance of separation/individuation theory to explain the life period under discussion acted as an obstacle to a fuller appreciation of the role of intersubjectivity.

To be more specific on this point, ego psychoanalytic theory has viewed the period after seven to nine months as the time of emerging more fully (“hatching” is the metaphor) from the undifferentiated and fused state that preceded it. This phase was predominantly devoted to establishing a separate and individuated self, to dissolving merger experiences, and to forming a more autonomous self that could interact with a more separated other. Given this view of the major life task of this period, it is not surprising that the theory failed to notice that the appearance of intersubjective relatedness permitted, for the first time, the creation of mutually held mental states and reality of this major developmental step. This as the time of emerging more fully (“hatching” is the metaphor) from the undifferentiated and fused state that preceded it. This phase was predominantly devoted to establishing a separate and individuated self, to dissolving merger experiences, and to forming a more autonomous self that could interact with a more separated other. Given this view of the major life task of this period, it is not surprising that the theory failed to notice that the appearance of intersubjective relatedness permitted, for the first time, the creation of mutually held mental states and new forms of experiencing union (or being-with) emerge equally out of the same experience of intersubjectivity.1

1 The point is not to exchange symbiosis for intersubjectivity and reverse the order of developmental tasks. The point is that intersubjectivity is equally crucial for creating experiences of being with a mentally similar other and for furthering individuation and autonomy, just as core-relatedness is equally crucial for both physical autonomy and togetherness.

In spite of a general disregard of intersubjective experience as a dyadic phenomenon, theorists have regularly appeared, often just outside of the mainstream, who have held positions receptive to the concept of intersubjectivity or subjective relatedness. Vygotsky's notion of the “intermental” (1962), Fairbairn's of the infant's innate interpersonal relatedness (1949), and MacMurray's of the field of the personal (1961) as well as Sullivan's of the interpersonal field (1953), are influential examples. It was against this background that the recent findings of the developmentalists acted to bring the developmental leap of intersubjectivity into its present sharp focus. It is not surprising that these developmentalists were largely interested either in the role of intentionality in the mother-infant interaction or in how infants acquire language. Both routes would ultimately lead to the issue of intersubjectivity and its underlying assumptions, which the philosophers had long been dealing with.

The Evidence for Intersubjective Relatedness
What, then, is the evidence for the appearance of intersubjective relatedness at seven to nine months? Trevarthan and Hubley (1978) have provided a definition of intersubjectivity that can be operationalized: “a deliberately sought sharing of experiences about events and things.” What subjective experiences does the infant give evidence of sharing or, at least, expecting the mother to share?

Recall that infants at this point in development are still preverbal. The subjective experiences that they can share must be of a kind that do not require translation into language. Three mental states that are of great relevance to the interpersonal world and yet do not require language come to mind. These are sharing joint attention, sharing intentions, and sharing affective states. What behaviors do infants show to suggest that they can conduct or appreciate these sharings?

Sharing the Focus of Attention

The gesture of pointing and the act of following another’s line of vision are among the first overt acts that permit inferences about the sharing of attention, or the establishing of joint attention. Mothers point and infants point. Let us start with the mother’s pointing. For her pointing to work, the infant must know to stop looking at the pointing hand itself and look in the direction it indicates, to the target. For a long time it was believed that infants could not do this until well into their second year because they could not escape their egocentric position. But Murphy and Messer (1977) showed that nine-month-olds do indeed detach their gaze from the pointing hand and follow the imaginary line to the target. “What has been mastered at this stage is a procedure for homing in on the attentional focus of another. It is a disclosure and discovery routine … highly generative within the limited world inhabited by the infant in the sense that it is not limited to specific kinds of objects. It has, moreover, equipped the child with a technique for transcending egocentrism, for insofar as he can appreciate another’s line of regard and decipher their marking intentions, he has plainly achieved a basis for what Piaget has called decentralization, using a coordinate system for the world other than the one of which he is the center” (Bruner 1977, 276). Earlier than nine months, infants show a preliminary form of this discovery procedure: they follow the mother’s line of vision when she turns her head (Scaife and Bruner 1975), just as the mother follows the infant’s line of vision (Collis and Schaffer 1975).

So far, we have seen only a routine or procedure for discovering another’s attentional focus. Infants of nine months, however, do more than that. They not only visually follow the direction of the point but, after reaching the target, look back at the mother and appear to use the feedback from her face to confirm that they have arrived at the intended target. This is now more than a discovery procedure. It is a deliberate attempt to validate whether the joint attention has been achieved, that is, whether the focus of attention is being shared, although the infant is not self-aware of these operations.

Similarly, infants begin to point at about nine months of age, though they do so less frequently than mothers do. When they do, their gaze alternates between the target and the mother’s face, as when she is pointing to see if she has joined in to share the attentional focus. It seems reasonable to assume that, even prior to pointing, the infant’s beginning capacity to move about, to crawl or cruise, is crucial in discovering alternative perspectives as is necessary for joint attention. In moving about, the infant continually alters the perspective held on some known stationary sight. Perhaps this initial acceptance of serially different perspectives is a necessary precursor to the more generic “realization” that others can be using a different coordinate system from the infant’s own.

These observations lead one to infer that by nine months infants have some sense that they can have a particular attentional focus, that mother can also have a particular attentional focus, that these two mental states can be similar or not, and that if they are not, they can be brought into alignment and shared. Inter-attentionality becomes a reality.

Sharing Intentions

Researchers interested in infants’ language acquisition have naturally been drawn to look at the most immediate origins of language use. These origins include the gestures, postures, actions, and nonverbal vocalizations that infants display just prior to and presumably as a precursor to language. Such protolinguistic forms have been examined closely by a number of researchers, all of whom agree in one way or another that beginning at about nine months the infant intends to communicate (Bloom 1973, 1983; Brown 1973; Bruner 1975, 1977, 1981; Dore 1975, 1979; Halliday 1975; Bates 1976, 1979; Ninio and Bruner 1977; Shields 1978; Bates et al.)
1979; Bretherton and Bates 1979; Harding and Golinkoff 1979; Trevarthan 1980; Harding 1982). The intention to communicate is different from the intention simply to influence another person. Bates (1979) provides a working definition of intentional communication that we can use:

Intentional communication is signaling behavior in which the sender is aware, a priori, of the effect that the signal will have on his listener, and he persists in that behavior until the effect is obtained or failure is clearly indicated. The behavioral evidence that permits us to infer the

presence of communicative intentions includes (a) alternations in eye gaze contact between the goal and the intended listeners, (b) augmentations, additions, and substitution of signals until the goal has been obtained, and (c) changes in the form of the signal towards abbreviated and/or exaggerated patterns that are appropriate only for achieving a communicative goal (p. 36).

The most straightforward and common examples of intentional communication are protolinguistic forms of requesting. For example, the mother is holdingsomething the infant wants—say, a cookie. The infant reaches out a hand, palm up towards mother, and while making grasping movements and looking back and forth between hand and mother's face intones, “Eh! Eh!” with an imperative prosody (Dore 1975). These acts, which are directed at a referent person, imply that the infant attributes an internal mental state to that person—namely, comprehension of the infant’s intention and the capacity to intend to satisfy that intention. Intentions have become shareable experiences. *Interintentionality* becomes a reality. Once again, it need not be self-aware.

Soon after nine months of age, the beginning of jokes and teasing on the infant's part can be seen. Dunn has observed the interactions between older and younger siblings and has richly described many subtle events between them that imply that they have shared moments of intersubjectivity. For instance, a three-year-old and a one-year-old suddenly burst into laughter over a private joke for which no one else can find the eliciting cause. Similar eruptions of teasing episodes occur that also remain opaque to adult comprehension (Dunn 1982; Dunn and Kendrick 1979, 1982). Such events require the attribution of shareable mental states that involve intentions and expectations. You can't tease other people unless you can correctly guess what is “in their minds” and make them suffer or laugh because of your knowing.

**Sharing Affective States**

Can infants also attribute shareable affective states to their social partners? A group of researchers (Emde et al. 1978; Klinert 1978; Campos and Stenber 1980; Emde and Sorce 1983; Klinnert et al. 1983) have described a phenomenon they call social referencing.

The year-old infants are placed in a situation bound to create uncertainty, usually ambivalence between approach and withdrawal. The infant may be lured with an attractive toy to crawl across a “visual cliff” (an apparent drop-off, which is mildly frightening at one year of age or so) or may be approached by an unusual but highly stimulating object such as a bleeping, flashing robot like R2D2 from *Star Wars*. When the infants encounter these situations and give evidence of uncertainty, they look towards mother to read her face for its affective content, essentially to see what they should feel, to get a second appraisal to help resolve their uncertainty. If the mother has been instructed to show facial pleasure by smiling, the infant crosses the visual cliff. If the mother has been instructed to show facial fear, the infant turns back from the “cliff,” retreats, and perhaps becomes upset. Similarly, if the mother smiles at the robot, the infant will too. If she shows fear, the infant will become more wary. The point

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2 Pointing is thought to originate in reaching, which gradually gets converted into a gesture (Bower 1974; Trevarthan 1974; Vygotsky 1966). In reaching, prior to age nine months, the child does not check back to mother’s face; after nine months, in reaching that is more gesture than action, the infant does.

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3 This can rapidly become a “give and take” game, as commented on by Spitz (1965) and Piaget (1954). For a list of related examples see Trevarthan and Hubley (1978) and Bretherton et al. (1981).
for our purposes is that infants would not check with the mother in this fashion unless they attributed to her the capacity to have and to signal an affect that has relevance to their own actual or potential feeling states.

Recent preliminary findings in our laboratory (MacKain et al. 1985) suggest that infants at about nine months notice the congruence between their own affective state and the affect expression seen on someone's face. If infants are made sad and upset by several minutes' separation from mother (this is the age of acute separation reactions), as soon as they are reunited with her they stop being upset but remain solemn and are judged by mother and experimenters still to be sadder than usual. If then, right after the reunion when they are still sad, the infants are shown a happy face and a sad face, they prefer to look at the sad face. This does not happen if the infants are either made to laugh first or had not been separated in the first place. One conclusion is that the infant somehow makes a match between the feeling state as experienced within and as seen "on" or "in" another, a match that we can call interaffectivity.

Interaffectivity may be the first, most pervasive, and most immediately important form of sharing subjective experiences. Demos (1980, 1982a), Thoman and Acebo (1983), Tronick (1979), and others, as well as psychoanalysts, propose that early in life affects are both the primary medium and the primary subject of communication. This is in accord with our observations. And at nine to twelve months, when the infant has begun to share actions and intentions about objects and to exchange propositions in prelinguistic form, affective exchange is still the predominant mode and substance of communications with mother. It is for this reason that the sharing of affective states merits primary emphasis in our views of infants of these ages. Most protolinguistic exchanges involving intentions and objects are at the same time affective exchanges. (When the baby for the first time says "ba-a" and points to the ball, the people around respond with delight and excitement.) The two go on simultaneously, and findings that define a given event as primarily linguistic or primarily affective depend on perspective. However, the infant who is just learning the discursive mode appears to be far more expert in the domain of affect exchange. In a similar vein, Treharthan and Hubley (1978) have commented that the sharing of affective moods and states appears before the sharing of mental states that reference objects, that is, things outside of the dyad. It seems clear that the sharing of affective states is of paramount importance during the first part of intersubjective relatedness, so much so that the next chapter will be devoted to a different view of the intersubjective sharing of feeling states.

The Nature of the Leap to Intersubjective Relatedness

Why does the infant suddenly adopt an organizing subjective perspective about self and others that opens the door to intersubjectivity? Is this quantum leap simply the result of a newly emergent, specific capacity or skill? Or does it result from the experience of social interactions? Or is it the maturational unfolding of a major human need and motive state? Piaget (1954), Bruner (1975, 1977), Bates (1976, 1979), and others whose primary approach is cognitive or linguistic view this achievement mainly in terms of an acquired social skill; the infant discovers generative rules and procedures for interactions that ultimately lead to the discovery of intersubjectivity. Treharthan (1978) has called this a constructionist approach.

Shields (1978), Newson (1977), Vygotsky (1962), and others have understood this achievement more as the result of mother's entrance into "meaningful" exchanges, beginning at the infant's birth. She interprets all the infant's behaviors in terms of meanings; that is, she attributes meanings to them. She provides the semantic element, all by herself at first, and continues to bring the infant's behavior into her framework of created meanings. Gradually, as the infant is able, the framework of meaning becomes mutually created. This approach, based on social experience, might be called the approach of interpersonal meanings.

Many thinkers in France and Switzerland have independently approached the problem along similar lines and pushed the notion of maternal interpretation into richer clinical territory. They assert that mother's "meanings" reflect not only what she observes but also her fantasies about who the infant is and is to become. Intersubjectivity, for them, ultimately involves interfantasy. They have asked how the fantasies of the parent come to influence the infant's behavior and ultimately to shape the infant's own fantasies. This reciprocal fantasy interaction is a form of created interpersonal meaning at the covert level (Kreisler, Fair, and Soulé 1974; Kreisler and Cramer 1981; Cramer 1982, 1982b; Lebovici 1983; Pinol-Douriez 1983). The creation of such meanings has been called
“interactions fantasmatique.” Fraiberg et al. (1975) and Stern (1971) in the United States have also paid close attention to the relationship between maternal fantasy and overt behavior.

Trevathan (1974, 1978) has stood relatively alone in maintaining that intersubjectivity is an innate, emergent human capacity. He points out that the other explanations for the appearance of intersubjectivity, especially the constructionist explanation, do not allow for any special awareness of humans or for the shared awareness that is so highly developed in humans. He sees this developmental leap as the “differentiation of a coherent field of intentionality” (Trevathan and Hubley 1978, p. 213) and views intersubjectivity as a human capacity present in a primary form from the early months of life.4

4 In fact, what we are calling intersubjectivity Trevathan calls “secondary intersubjectivity” (Trevathan and Hubley 1978), the later differentiation of a uniquely human intersubjective function. Intersubjectivity does seem to be an emergent human capacity. However, it is not meaningful to speak of primary intersubjectivity at three or four months of age, as Trevathan does (1979). This can only refer to protoforms that lack the essential ingredients for being called intersubjectivity. Only Trevathan's secondary stage is true intersubjectivity. There is much reason to believe that other social animals, for example dogs, are also capable of intersubjectivity as the concept is used here.

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All three viewpoints seem necessary for an adequate explanation of the emergence of intersubjectivity. Trevathan is right that some special form of awareness must come into play at this point and that the capacity for it must unfold maturationally. And that special awareness is what we are calling an organizing subjective perspective. However, the capacity must have some tools to work with, and the constructivist approach has provided the tools in the form of rule structures, actionformats, and discovery procedures. Finally, the capacity plus the tools would be operating in a vacuum without the addition of interpersonal meanings that are mutually created. All three taken together are required for a fuller account of intersubjective relatedness.

Once intersubjectivity has been tasted, so to speak, does it just remain as a capacity to be used or not, or as a perspective on self and other to be adopted or not? Or does it become a new psychological need, the need to share subjective experience?

We cannot cavalierly add to the list of basic psychological needs every time we come upon a new potentially autonomous capacity or need. The usual psychoanalytic solution to this problem, since the pioneering work of Hartmann, Kris, and Lowenstein (1946), is to call all such autonomously functioning capacities and need-like states “autonomous ego functions,” rather than instincts or motivational systems. This label gives them their self-evident primary autonomous status but also puts them potentially at the service of the “basic” psychoanalytic needs, whose higher status is protected. (It is mainly in the area of infancy research that the presence and pervasiveness of newly recognized capacities and needs has become apparent and poses the problem.)

Up to a point, this solution of autonomous ego functions has proven extremely helpful and generative for the field. The question is, when does an autonomous ego function become of such magnitude that it is better conceived as a “basic need or motivational system?” Curiosity and stimulus seeking are good cases in point. These appear to partake more of the quality of motivational systems than of mere autonomous ego functions.

What, then, about intersubjective relatedness? Are we to consider this another autonomous ego function? Or are we dealing with a primary psychobiological need? The answers to these questions are actually momentous for clinical theory. The more one conceives of intersubjective relatedness as a basic psychological need, the closer one refashions clinical theory toward the configurations suggested by Selt psychologists and some existential psychologists.

From the perspective of infancy research, the question remains open. One consideration in this issue is to figure out what is so reinforcing about intersubjectivity. There is no question but that its reinforcing power can be related to achieving security needs or attachment goals. For instance, intersubjective successes can result in feelings of enhanced security. Similarly, minor failures in intersubjectivity can be interpreted, experienced, and acted upon as total ruptures in a relationship. This is often seen in therapy.

A parallel view is that an overriding human need develops for human-group-psychic-membership—that is, inclusion in the human group as a member with potentially shareable subjective experiences, in contrast to a
nonmember whose subjective experiences are wholly unique, idiosyncratic, and nonshareable. The issue is basic. Opposite poles of this one dimension of psychic experience define different psychotic states. At one end is the sense of cosmic psychic isolation, alienation, and aloneness (the last person left on earth), and at the other end is the feeling of total psychic transparency, in which no single corner of potentially shareable experience can be kept private. The infant presumably begins to encounter this dimension of psychic experience somewhere in the middle, between the extreme poles, as most of us continue to do.5

Speaking teleologically, I assume that nature in the course of evolution created several ways to assure survival through group membership in social species. Ethology and attachment theory have spelled out for us the behavior patterns that serve to assure those physical and psychological intermeshings of individuals that enhance survival. I suggest that nature has also provided the ways and means for any subjective intermeshings of individuals that would add survival value. And the survival value of intersubjectivity is potentially enormous.

There is no question that different societies could minimize or maximize this need for intersubjectivity. For instance, if a society were socially structured so that it was assumed that all members had essentially identical, inner subjective experiences, and if homogeneity of this aspect of felt life were stressed, there would be little need, and no societal pressure, to enhance the development of intersubjectivity. If on the other hand a society highly valued the existence and the sharing of individual differences at this level of experience (as ours does), then their development would be facilitated by that society.

Let us return to life as lived from moment to moment and examine more fully how affective experiences can enter the intersubjective domain, a phenomenon that I call affect attunement.

5 The notion that the infant delegates omnipotence to the parent, imagining that the parent can always read the infant's mind, would predict that the infant could experience intersubjective experience like the psychotic at the total-transparency end of this dimension. This, however, would require a level of metacognition well beyond what is available at the age we are discussing. It is more likely that the infant starts in the middle, learning that some subjective states are shareable and others not.