

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Psychology, Cognitive Science

1. Core Definition

Intersubjectivity is a fundamental concept spanning philosophy, psychology, and sociology, referring generally to the shared understanding, meaning, or agreement that exists between two or more minds. At its most fundamental level, it represents the ability of individuals to share conscious experiences and engage in **empathetic communication**, moving beyond isolated, purely subjective internal states toward a mutually accessible domain of shared reality. The concept addresses the problem of how multiple subjects, each possessing their own unique internal perspective (the **first-person perspective**), can come to understand, interact with, and form a world recognized as common or shared.

The core definition encompasses two crucial dimensions often highlighted in academic discourse. First, in a philosophical context, intersubjectivity differentiates between public events (which are often treated as objective phenomena existing independently of individual minds) and the subjective, shared nature of the experience of those events. While a physical object exists objectively, the collective recognition and shared meaning attributed to that object requires intersubjectivity. Second, in psychological and developmental contexts, intersubjectivity is defined as the mechanism--often non-verbal or pre-linguistic--that allows for the alignment of psychological states. This capacity is essential for communication, as it requires the participant to grasp the perspective, intentions, and feelings of another (the **second-person perspective**), thereby creating a relational space where minds meet.

Essentially, intersubjectivity acts as the bridge between pure individual subjectivity and external objectivity. It is neither solely an internal state nor a fully external fact; rather, it is the structure of mutual recognition that makes social life, language, and shared cultural norms possible. Without this inherent capacity to share conscious experience, communication would be reduced to mere signaling, lacking the rich context of mutual understanding that defines human interaction.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While the term **intersubjectivity** gained prominence in the 20th century, the foundational ideas underlying it have deep roots in Western philosophy, particularly in the German Idealist tradition. Thinkers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel addressed the concepts of mutual recognition and the dialectic of self-consciousness, arguing that the self only achieves full awareness of its own subjectivity through interaction with and recognition by another subject. Similarly, the work of Johann Gottlieb Fichte explored the fundamental conditions necessary for consciousness to

encounter a non-ego, laying groundwork for later discussions on how the "I" relates to the "Other."

The formalization of intersubjectivity as a distinct philosophical problem is most famously attributed to the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. Husserl faced the challenge of reconciling his method of phenomenological reduction--which brackets the external world to focus solely on the intentional structure of consciousness--with the fact that consciousness is always consciousness of a shared, public world. In his *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), Husserl dedicated significant effort to the **problem of the other mind** (the *Fremderfahrung*), attempting to show how the subject constitutes the existence of other subjects based on analogical apperception, ultimately grounding objective reality in the transcendental intersubjective community.

Following Husserl, existentialists and hermeneutic philosophers, including Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, incorporated and modified the concept. Merleau-Ponty, in particular, emphasized that intersubjectivity is not merely a cognitive or inferential process, but is fundamentally rooted in the embodied interaction between subjects. He argued that the lived body is the primary means through which we access and understand the experiences of others, suggesting that the self and the other are mutually constituted in a shared world (the *Lebenswelt* or **Lifeworld**), moving the focus from transcendental logic to lived experience. The concept was then broadly adopted across the social sciences, becoming crucial in disciplines like social psychology, sociology (especially in the work of Alfred Schutz), and infant development research.

3. Key Characteristics and Forms

Intersubjectivity is not monolithic; researchers, especially in developmental psychology, often delineate different levels or forms based on the complexity and depth of shared experience involved. These forms illustrate the gradual developmental trajectory required for a fully realized capacity for social understanding.

Primary Intersubjectivity: This foundational level emerges early in infancy, typically within the first few months of life. It involves the direct, non-cognitive sharing of affective states and basic intentions. The classic example cited in the source content--the shared gaze between an infant and their caretaker--perfectly illustrates this. This sharing relies on synchronized interaction, imitation, and mutual regulation of emotions, establishing a basic sense of "we-ness" without requiring complex symbolic thought.

Secondary Intersubjectivity: Emerging around the end of the first year (9-12 months), this level involves the sharing of attention toward a third entity, such as an object or event. This is often termed **joint attention** or **triadic interaction**. For example, when a parent points to a toy and the infant follows the gaze and understands that the parent is commenting on the toy, they are engaging in secondary intersubjectivity. This marks a critical transition, as it allows for shared learning about the world and lays the groundwork for linguistic development.

Perspective Alignment: Intersubjectivity necessitates the coordination of different viewpoints. The concept directly relates to the movement between the subjective, internal **first-person perspective** (what I feel), the relational **second-person perspective** (what you feel, and the direct address between us), and the detached, descriptive **third-person perspective** (how an external observer describes the interaction). Successful intersubjective exchange requires the ability to switch between and integrate these perspectives to reach a common ground or understanding.

Common Ground and Mutuality: A key characteristic of intersubjectivity is the establishment of **common ground**--the set of shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions necessary for effective communication. This common ground is continuously negotiated and updated during social interaction, ensuring that participants operate within the same framework of meaning, enabling interpretation of ambiguous signals and intentions.

4. Role in Developmental Psychology

The role of intersubjectivity in developmental psychology is paramount, particularly in understanding how infants transition from autonomous, isolated beings into socially integrated individuals capable of complex communication and empathy. The early moments of interaction, such as the synchronized behavior between a baby and its caregiver (often termed **attunement**), are critical for establishing the infant's capacity for emotional regulation and social engagement.

Developmental researchers, influenced by figures like Daniel Stern and Colwyn Trevarthen, highlight that the infant is born prepared for social interaction. Through face-to-face interactions, vocalizations, and reciprocal responses, the infant learns that their internal states can be shared and reflected by another person. This sharing of conscious experiences, facilitated by the caregiver's empathetic response, teaches the infant about the connection between internal feelings and external expressions, which is foundational for later emotional intelligence. The breakdown or absence of these attuned intersubjective exchanges, as seen in certain clinical contexts, can significantly impair social and emotional development.

Intersubjectivity is often seen as a necessary precursor to the development of Theory of Mind (ToM), the cognitive capacity to attribute mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions) to oneself and others. While ToM is typically viewed as a cognitive, representational achievement (usually solidifying around ages 4-5), intersubjectivity provides the initial, embodied, and affective scaffolding. The ability to share attention and emotion (primary and secondary intersubjectivity) trains the child to recognize that others possess independent viewpoints, paving the way for the abstract understanding required to solve "false belief" tasks associated with ToM. Thus, the ability to share conscious experiences and empathetic communication is not just a result of development, but a driving force behind it.

5. Significance in Phenomenology and Social Theory

In philosophical phenomenology, intersubjectivity retains its status as the crucial solution to skepticism regarding the external world and the existence of other minds. If consciousness were purely solipsistic, then the validity of shared knowledge, scientific facts, and objective standards would be impossible to assert. Husserl's contribution established that the transcendental ego must necessarily encounter the other ego for the world to be constituted as an objective, shared reality, thereby rescuing phenomenology from **solipsism**.

In social theory, particularly in sociology and critical theory, intersubjectivity is essential for understanding social structure and action. Sociologists like Alfred Schutz utilized the concept to analyze the **social construction of reality**. Schutz argued that social interaction operates on the basis of a fundamental assumption--the "reciprocity of perspectives"--where individuals assume that if they were in the other person's place, they would perceive the world in roughly the same way. This assumed reciprocity forms the essential backdrop for all communication and cooperation, creating a stable, though socially negotiated, social world.

Furthermore, in areas like ethics and political theory, intersubjectivity highlights the normative demands of human relationships. Thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas ground their theories of communicative action on the premise that rational discourse requires an intersubjectively valid foundation--a shared commitment to truthfulness, rightness, and sincerity--to achieve legitimate consensus. Without the capacity for mutual recognition and empathetic understanding, ethical systems and democratic deliberation would lack the necessary mechanism for resolving conflict and generating shared moral norms.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its wide acceptance, the concept of intersubjectivity faces significant theoretical challenges, primarily concerning the mechanism of its realization and the extent of the "shared" experience.

One major debate centers on the **Problem of the Other Minds**. While phenomenologists attempt to resolve this by showing how the existence of the other is "constituted" in the self's experience, radical skeptics argue that there is no verifiable, non-inferential way for one subject to truly access the internal subjective state of another. If all experience is ultimately filtered through one's own consciousness, the claim of true shared consciousness might remain a metaphysical assumption rather than a demonstrable fact.

Another criticism arises from post-structuralist and critical perspectives, which argue that the concept often overlooks power dynamics. If intersubjectivity is framed as a harmonious, mutual sharing of meaning, it risks masking the ways in which dominant ideologies or asymmetries of

power dictate the terms of shared experience, potentially forcing the subordinate party to adopt the perspective of the dominant one. In this view, shared experience is not always a genuine meeting of minds but an imposition of one subjective reality onto another.

Finally, cognitive scientists debate whether intersubjectivity is primarily an embodied, relational phenomenon (as argued by enactivists and developmental researchers focusing on shared affect and motor systems, such as **mirror neurons**) or if it necessarily involves complex cognitive simulation and representation (as preferred by traditional Theory of Mind models). The distinction between direct perception of intentions and inference about beliefs continues to shape research into the neurological and psychological underpinnings of mutual understanding.

Further Reading

[Intersubjectivity \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Edmund Husserl \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Theory of Mind \(Wikipedia\)](#)