

INTERSUBJECTIVE INTERCHANGE

In dialogue, an *interchange* occurs among participants. Ideas, interpretations, opinions and predictions continuously flow, evolve and change. This “meeting of minds” is a dynamic, stimulating and satisfying experience that results in heightened awareness of others. In the philosophical literature this deep awareness of others is called *intersubjectivity*.

Intersubjectivity refers to a relational connection that arises during successful communication. When the conscious minds or *subjectivities* of two or more individuals become aware and open to one another as they work or talk together, *intersubjectivity*, or shared understanding is experienced (Crossley, 1996). Intersubjectivity allows individuals, regardless of their differences, “to meet” and freely interchange thoughts, feelings and beliefs without fear or the need to be defensive. Intersubjectivity has the potential to strengthen relationships, commitment to the well-being of others and planning for joint actions.

As a result of interchange, one’s perspective may shift, enlarge or become more inclusive. New ideas emerge that represent an amalgamation of the group’s shared thoughts and no longer belong to the individuals involved. (Crossley, 1996). However intersubjectivity does not always lead to agreement. While the views or ideas of others may be understood, the other’s perspective may not be adopted or be consistent with one’s own.

Interchange and Diversity

The context of communication is essential to understanding others. Meaning depends on context and the individual's history and culture. According to the social constructivist view, meaning is socially mediated, that is, our understanding grows out of our interactions with others. Because interchange is situated within a socio-cultural context, making sense of experience requires understanding others not only others ideas but also their experiences and cultural understandings. Within a group, "cultural horizons interact with those of other traditions" (Feather, 2000 p. 31). In many ECE programs today, diversity has a significant effect on communication. Life histories, differences in family structure and childrearing, cultural styles and preferences for conversation have implications not only for work with children and families but also for communication among teachers. The diversity of backgrounds among individuals in a group poses additional challenges to interchange. Taking the position that intersubjectivity is a process or action, Feather (2000) asserts: "consequently intersubjectivity is something performed, enacted or made real through utterance rather than being consciousness of knowledge itself." (p. 16).

Philosophical Roots

While the term *intersubjective* first appears in the literature at the end of the nineteenth century, it is an area of philosophical thought that has a much longer tradition. Many philosophers have pondered *alterity* or otherness, and the nature of human relations (Crossley (1998)). Descartes' famous proposition, "I think, therefore I am," affirms subjectivity, the individual consciousness and the existence of self, However Descartes regarded the existence of conscious beings

outside the self as illusory. Philosophical proof of the existence of the other is difficult. Wittengstein comments that although one cannot experience being another, it is possible to imagine another (Crossley, 1998).

I and Thou: The Philosophy of Relationship

I and Thou (1939) is a philosophical examination of the nature of relationship. According to Buber. "in the beginning is relation" (p.18). From the moment of birth, "the effort to establish relation comes first" (p. 27). While Buber is ultimately concerned with spiritual relationship--"in each Thou, we address the eternal Thou" (p. 101)-- he also stresses that "meaning is not that of 'another life,' but that of this life of ours, not one of the world 'yonder,' but that of this world of ours." (p. 110). He reminds the reader, "true beings are lived in the present" (p. 13). Thus being in relation is fundamental to being human.

Buber defines two primary relations that are possible between the self and other: *I - It* and *I - Thou*. Each is an inseparable entity. Examining the *I – Thou/ I - It* dichotomy yields important insights about human nature and the meaning of intersubjective relationships.

Buber offers many comparisons to distinguish *I - Thou* and *I – it*. In Buber's view, *I - Thou* refers to seeing the other as a subject whereas in *I – It*, the other is viewed as an object. Individuals may act toward another as a *Thou* or as an *It*. According to Buber, *I - thou* is a relation that is always in the present. In contrast, *I- it* is a *connection* that is always in the past. A community includes people in a *thou* sense whereas an organization is about *it* or things. I-Thou

relationships are characterized by trust, caring, compassion and forgiveness. (Krstiansen, 1996).

This dichotomy is continually present, as Buber comments, “life swings by nature between Thou and it” (p. 52). Friedman (1996) emphasizes the importance of both relationships, “relating and distancing,” (p. 16) and that the *I - It* relationship serves a purpose that is not always negative.

Moreover the *I* within each entity has a different perception of self. The *I* in *I - It*, seeks individualization and detachment from the other. This *I* is conscious of itself and its separateness as a subject of experience.

The *I* in *I – Thou*, has a relationship and solidarity with the other. For this *I*, life is about relationships and becoming conscious of itself as a person and as subjectivity. The *I – Thou* relationship is comprehensive. In addition to the relationship of the individual to others, it also includes the relationship to the natural world, art and to God or spirit. Intersubjective experience occurs as a result of recognizing the humanity in others--the other as a *thou*-- rather than objectifying the other as an *it*, a means to an end, thing or an extension of self. Biswas (1996) comments that people today see nature as an *it*, but primitive people see nature as thou, that “the world is redundant with life” (p. 224).

Language is critical to relationship: “*I* and *Thou* take their stand not merely in relation, but also in the solid give-and-take of talk” and “the universe is made manifest as language.” (p. 103). The world of *it* consists of the objects that form culture and knowledge. These objects have symbolic and historical meaning. According to Buber, *it* is something that is experienced and can be used. In the *it world*, knowledge is extracted from things (Biswas, 1996). Unfortunately, some

people consistently treat others as if they were an *it*. This tendency diminishes the individual's ability to enter relationships.

The *I – Thou* and *I – It* distinction has implications for ECE. Early childhood educators may want to consider the dynamics of teacher – child, teacher – parent, child – child, teacher – teacher and administrator teacher relationships through this lens. Ethical standards for the ECE field also afford guidance for professionals in appropriate interactions with others. Curricula that are relationship-based such as the Program for Infant and Toddler Caregivers (PITC) reflect a commitment to *I –Thou* practices. The notion of a community (*I – Thou*) vs. an organization (*I – it*) is also relevant in deciding when a school functions as a community or as an organization. Buber warns: “If a culture ceases to be centered in the living and continually renewed relational event, then it hardens into the world of *It*” (p. 54). It goes without saying, that the more an individual, group or society becomes obsessed with *It*, relationships with others suffer or only matter in so far as they serve the need for acquisition of *it*. As collectors of things and experiences, people risk losing their humanity (Biswas, 228). Obvious examples of *It* as a dominant force include the desire for wealth, property or material possessions. Educationally speaking, the single-minded focus on test scores offer a cautionary example of overemphasizing *It* and devaluing relations.

True power stems from the “lived reality” of the *I – Thou* relationship: “Reality exists only in . . . effective action.’ Inner ‘ reality, too, exists only if there is mutual action. The most powerful and the deepest reality exist where

everything enters into the effective action . . . the united I and the boundless *Thou*" (Buber, 89).

Developing collaborative relationships and building dialogue in and across communities and institutional settings such as schools must be predicated on I – Thou, awareness of humanity and valuing others and their ideas

Intersubjectivity and Phenomenology

The German philosopher Husserl (1970) is considered to be the founder of phenomenology. According to this philosophy, objects and other phenomena are manifested through individual consciousness. Haney (2000) states that phenomenology is the study of the relationship between subject and object: "The world and its objects are dependent upon the consciousness which holds them in its awareness" (Haney, p.2).

Haney (2000) finds that subjectivity is more fundamental than objectivity because objects "derive their sense from the meaning-bestowing subjects which constitute them." (p.1), In other words, the objects, events and other phenomena gain existence through interpretation. Furthermore, culture itself "is an acquired interpretation." (p. 3).

Perception of the external world is contextually situated. As a result, the whole of the perceptual field can never be fully realized. Moreover what is perceived is affected by the reality that "we are immersed in it." (Feather, 2000, p.4)

Echoing the active learning notion that is prevalent in ECE, a key component of phenomenological theory is that knowledge is doing (Feather 2000). Thus to know the world, requires experience and research.

According to the phenomenological position, the individual is able to perceive another in a manner similar to the way outside objects are perceived. Drawing on the work of Dilthey, Shutz, Husserl and Mead, Feather (2000) defines *we consciousness* as "a totalized state of consciousness in which the consciousness of all those with some interaction with an individual's biography is contained." (p. 22). Friedman (1996) notes that knowing others differs markedly from scientific knowing based on objective observation: "to understand the human one must be a participant." (p. ??)

Habermas proposes the concept of *lifeworld* to describe the interrelationships of culture, society and personality. . Habermas believes that a social group has a tendency to work toward community consensus. Shared meaning depends on consensus. *Communicative norms*, described as the "ideal speech situation" for developing communicative competence, provide tools for productive problem-solving(Feather 2000, p.15-16).

Good communication can influence the lifeworld in three possible directions: toward mutual understanding, toward coordination of action and toward socialization. These actions are mutually oriented, mutually negotiated, transmitted and renewed. The result of these actions is the production, transmission and renewal of cultural knowledge

Habermas also divides the social world into interaction and structure (Feather, 2000) Interaction involves the daily life of people while structure includes social institutions related to money and power.

As intersubjectivity increases, there is also a potential risk; the delimiting effect of *group think*. This may happen among a group such as a social clique, fanatical religious group or political lobby that becomes overly focused on their agenda or goals. Crossley (1996) finds that imagination is a resource for overcoming intersubjective inertia. Imagination transforms experience and cause changes in thinking.

Society is a product of interchange: "Society is the culmination of intersubjective praxis, of action and interaction and . . . of the material resources mobilizing the process. (Crossley, 1996, p. 74). According to Foucault, power emerges not from individual strength by is the result of "inter-action." Rather than belonging to persons, it forms at the "intersection of actions" (Crossley, 1996). Power is different from violence and physical determination. Contrary to these negative forces, the power of communication is to create action. .Both communication and imagination are powerful "actions upon actions" rather than actions on people (Crossley, p. 136).

Primary and Secondary Intersubjectivity

As infants and their caregivers tune-in to one another, they become more aware of the interest of the other and seek mutually interesting and satisfying experiences. Trevarthen (2000) defines two types of intersubjectivity. *Primary*

intersubjectivity involves interactions between the infant and mother or caregiver. *Secondary subjectivity* relates to interactions with the caregiver around objects. As Crossley notes, “the environment and its objects mediate relations between infant and caregiver” (Crossley, 1996, p.53).

Play is a vehicle for symbolic activity and the development of intersubjectivity. Play is one way to experience the perspectives of others and imagine the thoughts, experiences and feelings of another. As children begin to enjoy socio-dramatic play, they gain valuable understanding of the perspectives and feelings of others (Crossley, 1996).

Indirect support for the hypothesis that intersubjectivity can have nonverbal, symbolic aspects comes from research by Trevarthen (2000). His study demonstrates how infants and mothers use gestures and other nonverbal expressions to communicate and develop intersubjective meaning.

Secondary intersubjectivity might be described as the result of a different type of relationship. In Buberian terms, the *I- Thou* relationship unfolds as interactions occur around an *it*, objects, materials, events and symbolic systems. These interactions have the potential to deepen the *I – Thou* relationship. Secondary intersubjectivity thus involves the objects of the educational enterprise that draw the efforts, expertise, skills, interests and concerns of teachers, parents and children as well as their relationships with one another.

As an agent for developing secondary intersubjectivity, *it*—objects, events, information--serves a critical function for communicating meaning. As suggested by semiotic theory (to be discussed in the next chapter), within the context of

human relationships, *it* has the potential to be used as a sign that can be interpreted.

In educational contexts, *it* can be utilized for at least three different signification purposes. First *It* can be a subject, such as content or information to be learned or a specific skill to be mastered in the areas of literacy, mathematics, science, etc. Second, *it* can also function as an experience or set of experiences from which meanings can be derived. Viewing art, listening to music, going on field trips, attending cultural events or a thematic teaching or science unit fall into this category. In these ways, *it* is a subject of analytic thought and develops cultural knowledge.

A third possibility involves individuals or groups who use *it* as a tool to represent or construct meaning from experience. ECE programs influenced by the study of the Reggio Emilia Approach and constructivist educational ideas recognize the value of *it* for these symbolic purposes. Documentation, project-based learning and expressive arts are examples of *it* as a means for symbolic representation. A work of art, for example, involves the artist and receiver in the mutual giving of meaning from the self to the object: “The being of art springs from the being of the human” (Biswas, 1996, p. 229). For Biswas, this begins an “unending dialogue” with the object through perception. In this sense, *it* extends the possibilities for human action and is a means for creating and transforming culture.

Effects of Intersubjectivity

Through intersubjective experiences, understanding of one's own identity and perspectives are clarified. In addition, insight is gained concerning the identity, differences, and perspectives of others as well as the social and cultural dimensions of experience. (Habermas, 1976; Himley, 2000, citing Merleau-Ponty; Rinaldi, 2001). As individuals move closer in a "dance" of relationships (Edwards and Raikes, 2002), feelings of synchrony and belongingness are experienced among those in the group (Hall, 1976). Intersubjectivity offers early childhood educators opportunities for renewal, a sense of purpose, vitality and the potential for action (Tegano, 2002).

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