What does it mean to be part of a greater whole? How does our worldview, or model of reality, impact what we understand about who we are and how we relate to others? And how can we become more aware of all the ways we are part of an interrelated, global community?

Recently my colleagues and I explored these questions in a report titled “Worldview Transformation and the Development of Social Consciousness” for the Journal of Consciousness Studies. Based on decades of research on consciousness transformation, IONS researchers have developed a theoretical framework for understanding social consciousness. In this way, we have sought to understand the ways in which people are both conscious and unconscious about the world around them. More importantly, we seek to understand the powers and potentials of individual consciousness to move toward collective well-being.

It’s clear that we are social beings from the very beginning of our lives. Social relations impact every aspect of our being. Of course, there is developmental variability in the extent to which each of us is aware of culture’s impact on us. It takes a level of perceptual acuity, for example, to realize how all the car commercials we’re constantly exposed to impact what we drive and how we feel about it.
Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

With greater human choice and awareness, we may begin to express our human spirit in the face of ongoing social and political influences. This leads to Level Two, which we call embedded social consciousness. Here people gain awareness of how their experiences are conditioned by the social world. This can be accomplished through personal reflections and contemplative practices such as meditation. Scientific and spiritual research suggests that individual consciousness is embedded in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Levels Three to Five involve what we call collaborative social consciousness. Levels of social consciousness are relative to the social world we are embedded in or identify with. Others begin to shape the social environment through collaborative actions. Within education, for example, we find an increasing focus on participatory learning, service learning and project-based learning—each was developed to enhance the nature of our awareness of ourselves in relation to the social world. This can be accomplished through personal reflection and self-reflection exercises. Whether it’s insight meditation, a Catholic confession, or taking inventory of one’s behavior in a 12-step program, a self-reflection exercise can help us to become more aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Let’s consider what we call collaborative social consciousness. Levels of social consciousness are relative to the social world we are embedded in or identify with. Others begin to shape the social environment through collaborative actions. Within education, for example, we find an increasing focus on participatory learning, service learning and project-based learning—each was developed to enhance the nature of our awareness of ourselves in relation to the social world. This can be accomplished through personal reflection and self-reflection exercises. Whether it’s insight meditation, a Catholic confession, or taking inventory of one’s behavior in a 12-step program, a self-reflection exercise can help us to become more aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Levels One to Five involve what we call embodied social consciousness. At this stage, we are not only aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Cultivating Social Consciousness

By Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Ph.D.

What does it mean to be part of a greater whole? How do we view the world, or model of reality, impact what we understand about who we are and how we relate to others? And how can we become more aware of all ways we are part of an interconnected, global community?

Recently, colleagues and I completed two major projects in support of the Institute of Noetic Sciences’ (IONS) research on consciousness transformation, the Workshops and the Department of Social Consciousness. For the Journal of Consciousness Studies, a set of studies based on decades of research on consciousness transformation, IONS researchers have developed a theoretical framework for understanding social consciousness. In this way, we have sought to understand the ways in which people are both conscious and conscious about the world around them. More importantly, we seek to understand the power and potential of individual consciousness to move toward collective well-being. It’s not that we are social beings from the very beginning of our lives. Social interactions impact every aspect of our being. Of course, there is developmentality at work. In the extent to which each of us is aware of culture’s impact on us, it takes a level of perceptual acuity, for example, to know how all the cars commanded are constantly exposed to impact what we see and how we feel about it. The complex dynamics of social identity unfold through five nested levels of social consciousness. These, in turn, relate to transformations in consciousness.

Level One is what we term embedded social consciousness. At this stage, we are not only aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Level Two is what we call collaborative social consciousness. Levels of social consciousness are relative to the social world we are embedded in or identify with. Others begin to shape the social environment through collaborative actions. Within education, for example, we find an increasing focus on participatory learning, service learning and project-based learning—each was developed to enhance the nature of our awareness of ourselves in relation to the social world. This can be accomplished through personal reflection and self-reflection exercises. Whether it’s insight meditation, a Catholic confession, or taking inventory of one’s behavior in a 12-step program, a self-reflection exercise can help us to become more aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Level Three is what we term engaged social consciousness. At this stage, we are not only aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Level Four involves what we call collaborative social consciousness. Levels of social consciousness are relative to the social world we are embedded in or identify with. Others begin to shape the social environment through collaborative actions. Within education, for example, we find an increasing focus on participatory learning, service learning and project-based learning—each was developed to enhance the nature of our awareness of ourselves in relation to the social world. This can be accomplished through personal reflection and self-reflection exercises. Whether it’s insight meditation, a Catholic confession, or taking inventory of one’s behavior in a 12-step program, a self-reflection exercise can help us to become more aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.

Level Five is what we call resonant social consciousness. At this stage, we are not only aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our intention to contribute to the greater good. There is a movement from “me” to “we,” as our awareness moves us to actively engage in the well-being of others and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective-taking, in which we get better at seeing things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from interpersonal neurobiology suggests that our brains develop through our connections to others. Other research indicates that we have built-in drives that spur us to search for purpose in our lives. This suggests that our brains are social organs.