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.
Cultivating Social Consciousness

Written by Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, PhD

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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 the colleagues and I completed our project entitled "The Neuroscience of 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 is our belief that social beings are not only products of our lived experiences but also are part of a larger field of consciousness that serves as a baseline for our own development.

Level One of social consciousness is what we refer to as embedded. Here, consciousness is shaped without our awareness by social, cultural, and biological factors. It’s a kind of passive consciousness that serves as a baseline for our own development. Social factors, intuited with our cognitive and biological processes, limit our ability to know and understand the world around us. Psychological studies of interpersonal neurobiology, for instance, illustrate how our human brains are often "hard-wired" to exclude information that does not fit into our current meaning systems. We see what we expect to see and can consistently miss things we are not anticipating that don’t support our belief systems.

With greater human choice and level of 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 self-regulated social consciousness. Here people gain awareness of how their experiences are conditioned by the social world. This can be accomplished through personal reflection and contemplative practices such as meditation. Scientific and spiritual traditions are important sources for gaining new perspectives and awareness of the social world and our place in it. Psychologist and religious historian Louise L. Rosenblatt emphasizes that it is the capacity for self-reflexivity—the ability to step back and reflect on our thought processes—that stimulates shifts in our mental representations. Whether it’s straightforward, a Catholic confessional, or in the form of using one’s behavior in a 12-step program, a self-reflection exercise can help us to become more aware of our own inner processes. In this process, we begin to ask ourselves questions, to open our own brains and remove our perceptual blinders.

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 transformation to contribute to the greater good. There is a resonance from "no" to "yes," in our awareness moves us to actively engage in the web of beings and the world. There is also an expansion of perspective and empathy. At this stage of social consciousness, individuals can begin to see things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from research in 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 of social consciousness is what we call collaborative social consciousness. Gaining greater awareness of others in relation to the social world leads to a higher level of collaboration. People begin to recognize a broader picture of our collective human potential. 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 and empathy. At this stage of social consciousness, individuals can begin to see things from another person’s point of view. Scientific data from research in 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 consciousness. At this stage of development, people report a sense of essential interconnectedness with others. They describe a “field” of shared interrelatedness that we enter into and where we feel a sense of belonging and connection. This stage in social consciousness by spiritual teachers, educators, and psychologists. These notions are further developed by research, such as that conducted at IONS, that speaks to measurable links between one person’s intention and another person’s physiological activity, revealing an underlying field of shared awareness. When we are attuned to the lack of connection in our social environment, we can be proactive and provide an empirical basis for connections that lie beyond our physical relations.

Scientists, scholars, and contemplatives agree: We are finally beginning to work together to explore the ways in which people are conditioned by the biological, social, and physical world in which they are embedded. In so doing, we can begin to recognize a broader picture of our collective human potential.

For three decades, scientist and anthropologist Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Ph.D., has pioneered clinical and field-based research in the area of human transformation and healing. She is a thought leader on matters of individual and social change whose respected voice offers new insights into the most pressing challenges of our time. Marilyn’s books include Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life and Consciousness and Healing: The Complex Dynamics of Social Identity. These, in turn, relate to transformations in worldview.

As we begin to appreciate the ways we are conditioned by the social world in which we are embedded, we can begin to recognize a broader picture of our collective human potential. 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. This leads to an expansion of perspective and empathy. At this stage, we are not only aware of the social environment, but begin to mobilize our transformation to contribute to the greater good. There is a resonance from “no” to “yes,” in our awareness moves us to actively engage in the web of beings and the world.

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