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Relational Conscious

By David Hay



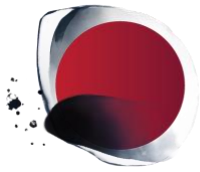
Awareness of our interdependence with other beings.



“Relational consciousness is a psychosocial term that has recently gained attention in the field of religious and spiritual development. It refers to an awareness of our interdependence with other beings, including God, animals, and other humans. It suggests a nuanced sensitivity to the complexity and connection of all creatures. More specifically, the phrase refers to an intuitive, experiential awareness, a felt sense, rather than a mere intellectual awareness. The term was popularized by David Hay in the 1990s through his research into the spirituality of English school children. From interviews with children, Hay came to the conclusion that much of what has been seen as spirituality or religion is actually this awareness of being in relationship with some larger reality.

Hay's work bears many similarities to *Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902 by William James who also sought to discover the range and commonalities of paranormal experiences, or what he called an awareness of "the more." James concluded that religious experience cut across all cultures and could be an invigorating force for good. Hay carries James' work further by contributing insights into childhood spirituality. Hay argues that children are born with relational consciousness and that it persists throughout early childhood. However, in the west this sensitivity is suppressed by age 7 to 9. According to Hay, this suppression tends to lead to a societal deterioration of values and loss of social coherence.

The term relational consciousness provides educators (especially those in public schools) a way to talk about spirituality without equating it with a single religious tradition. It is a step toward finding common terminologies among those who lack a common tradition yet want to work together to promote spiritual growth in children. Hay would like to see educators and others protect relational consciousness in children, especially through stories. Re-



telling, reading, and discussing stories help children to name familiar experiences (such as flow or point awareness, defined below).

Relational consciousness is an alternative to the "possessive individualism" that has become the norm in the Western world. Possessive individualism holds that

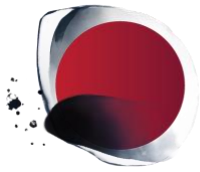
1. The only reliable way of knowing the world is through the physical senses, especially through science.
2. A human being's primary identity is as an individual who defines himself in opposition to other beings (i.e., at odds with other humans and nature).
3. Possession (of things, power, and property) is the most important way of expressing one's value.

In contrast, relational consciousness holds that

1. What can be known extends beyond the physical world and includes supernatural, spiritual, or nonmaterial realities; these can be accessed through other forms of consciousness besides the scientific and rational.
2. A human being's primary identity is in relationship with other beings (intentional connection with God, people, nature).
3. In the large picture, possessions are fleeting and unimportant measures of value.

According to Hay, relational consciousness manifests itself in relationships, specifically four key relationships, including

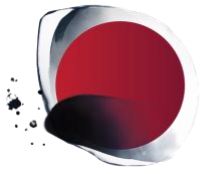
1. Self and God include concerns about ultimate reality, the transcendent realm, the presence of God, and love of God.
2. Self and people refer to awareness of interpersonal relations.



3. Self and world refer to sensitivity to beauty and nature, including landscapes, plants, and animals.
4. Self and self refer to identity, self-worth, concern about "the real me," and belief in life after death of the body.

Research on relational consciousness grew out of questions about how ordinary children talk about spirituality. During a 3-year qualitative study during the 1990s, Hay, Nye, and others interviewed numerous English school children, most of them irreligious. Hay was especially interested in nonreligious language for articulating felt experiences of interdependence with God or nature. He found that most children could clearly recall memories of relational consciousness from early childhood, but as they matured, they began to discount them, so that by puberty most suppressed relational consciousness altogether. Adults and peers seemed to conspire to convince children that spiritual experiences and beliefs were trivial and misleading. Even for those children who were part of a religious tradition, once they reached a certain age, the experiential component of religion was often supplanted by dogma. As children lost touch with relational consciousness, most accepted a rationalist, materialist worldview. Results of Hay's research were published in *The Spirit of the Child* in 1998. Although his research methodology has been criticized, many educators have embraced his ideas.

Hay's relational consciousness challenges the dominant view of religious development in childhood (based on the views of Jean Piaget and James Fowler), which holds that children between birth and age 7 are "pre-religious" and thus unable to grasp spiritual reality. Fowler argues that children's spirituality must advance through literalist and conventional stages that necessitate identifying with one belief system; beliefs rather than experience become the most important way of supporting spiritual growth. Fowler also argues that only

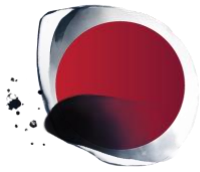


exceptional individuals grow into a sense of connectedness to all other beings, and then only later in life.

In contrast, Hay argues that children, especially under age 7, have access to important kinds of knowing, even when they lack a belief system that validates such knowing. Hay would like to see schools as well as religious institutions focus upon the experiential aspect of spirituality rather than upon teaching creeds. In this way, relational consciousness could be kept alive and deepened throughout the life cycle. For this to occur, adults should focus children's attention daily toward spiritual awareness (through silence, contemplation, prayer, mantras, etc.) and provide a cultural expression of spirituality (through ritual, stories, and social teachings). These activities need not be aligned with a particular religious tradition. Instead of discounting children's innate spirituality, educators should regard it as a source of insight.

The loss of relational consciousness has had disastrous consequences for human societies, according to Hay. Those who lose relational consciousness lose a sense of their own value and purpose, and they lose respect for other creatures. They cease to respect or believe in God. Children grow up alienated from nature and society. Such losses can lead to narcissism, rampant consumerism, aggression, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, and despair. Hay links the loss of relational consciousness to widespread social disintegration, violence, and degradation of the natural environment.

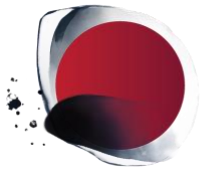
Hay developed a set of categories for three different aspects of relational consciousness: awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing. These categories provide a framework for cultivating children's innate spirituality. Hay and his colleagues would like to see these different kinds of awareness integrated into school curricula so that children can



develop fully as spiritual beings (see Spiritual Formation and Mystagogy). These aspects of relational consciousness are briefly described below.

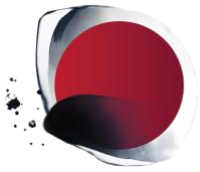
Awareness sensing refers to alternative ways of knowing or modes of perceiving the spiritual world. For example "here and now" awareness (also called point awareness) involves focusing attention on the present moment, as in Buddhist mindfulness meditation. Another example is "flow," the experience of being caught up in an all-absorbing experience. Activities such as meditation, prayer, silence, and periodic withdrawal are ways to cultivate awareness. Mystery sensing concerns ultimate questions about reality and the purpose of the universe. It includes emotions such as wonder, awe, delight, and amazement. It also suggests an awareness of human limitations and the danger of arrogance. A strong sense of mystery leads to self-forgetfulness and union with God (or the spiritual world). It can also lead to a sense of purpose and right livelihood. Activities such as worship, ritual, and "philosophizing" (asking questions with children, listening to them, discussing what is unknown) can enhance a sense of mystery. The arts also play a part. Value sensing refers the ability to discern good from evil, hopefully in order to cultivate the good. What is worthy? What is enduring? What is true? What is the best way to treat others? These are the questions addressed as one develops a sense of value. Perhaps this category is the one most developed in American religious life, with a strong emphasis on character development and the cultivation of personal virtue.

Hay believes that people in the Western world lack an adequate language and discourse for relational consciousness. They are blinded by their rational, secular, individualist worldview and thus see human beings primarily as isolated individualists. Educators can provide language and discourse for relational consciousness through the use of various kinds of stories. In the past, shared religious stories fostered relational consciousness and



prosocial values. Handed down from one generation to the next, religious stories included Creation stories, biblical narratives (parting of the Red Sea, Jesus' birth), and lives of the saints and other religious heroes (Moses, David, Martin Luther King, or Mary Baker Eddy). In the West, religious stories no longer dominate the imagination the way they once did. Hay argues that other kinds of stories can be used in school to foster relational consciousness. He mentions specifically autobiography, fiction, the language of play and games, and the language of science and technology. For example, many children have embraced science fiction, the language of technology, and fantasy to talk about moral and spiritual issues. For many, this has become an accepted way to speak of other worlds. Children's reading (or listening to stories) can help them imagine traveling through time and space, encountering parallel universes, morphing into other states or being, and fighting battles with cosmic significance. Hay suggests that such narratives are a spiritually important alternative to the overemphasis on empirical science as the only source of truth. Hay's work is significant for the way he enables educators from many traditions to work together to preserve and promote children's spirituality. By emphasizing a discourse of experience, they allow children themselves to put their spirituality into words. Shared terminology (such as Hay provides) and shared stories help adults to provide children with scaffolding for spiritual experiences. Because religious discourse is not useful for all people, children can benefit from access to other kinds of discourse and stories. There is also the potential for other discourses to enrich religious discourse.

Relational consciousness is especially useful for those concerned about the natural environment because of the way it links relating to the earth with relating to God. It is also of great value for those who want to promote dialogue among adherents of various faiths and between the religious and secular realms. Several criticisms have been leveled against Hay's work. He has been criticized for not adequately addressing evil and sin. Hay focuses



upon the positive aspects of spiritual awareness; for him, what James calls "the more" is always positive. Adherents of particular religions may object to Hay's efforts to find a common ground and a common language to be shared by all humans. Hay leaves it to others to take into account gender and ethnicity as important factors in relational consciousness.

Despite these possible objections, the concept of relational consciousness provides a way to explore spiritual development that is both pragmatic and innovative.”

Reference

David Hay

http://exhumator.com/00-200-00_esoteric-religious-spiritual-relational-consciousness.html

Image (search “relational consciousness”) courtesy of: [Katharina Roehler](#) [@mondkind](#)

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