

Original Article

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND INTERCORPOREALITY

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Abstract

This paper begins to trace a conceptual progression from interaction as inherently meaningful to intersubjectivity, and from intersubjectivity as the co-presence of alter egos to intercorporeality. It is an exercise in cultural phenomenology insofar as ethnographic instances provide the concrete data for phenomenological reflection. In examining two instances in which the intercorporeal hinge between participants in an interaction is in the hands, and two in which this hinge is in the lips, I touch in varying degrees on elements of embodiment including language, gesture, touch, etiquette, alterity, spontaneity, body image, sonority, mimesis, and immediacy. The analysis supports the substantive conclusion that intersubjectivity is a concrete rather than an abstract relationship and that it is primary rather than a secondary achievement of isolated egos, as well as the methodological conclusion that cultural phenomenology is not bound by subjective idealism.

Keywords

intersubjectivity; intercorporeality; cultural phenomenology; embodiment; anthropology

Subjectivity (2008) 22, 110–121. doi:10.1057/sub.2008.5

Introduction

In a famous quote from his article “Cultural Anthropology and Psychiatry,” Edward Sapir argued that the “true locus of culture is in the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the



world of meanings which each one of these individuals may unconsciously abstract for himself from his participation in these interactions” (Sapir, 1961, p. 151). I have always understood this as a founding passage for psychological, symbolic, and interpretive anthropology, one that moreover bridges the distance to sociology’s traditions of symbolic interactionism and the Weberian quest for *verstehen*. Thinking about this passage while preparing this article, however, I became aware of a problem in this founding text. The problem is that if meaning is on “the subjective side”, then interaction must be on the “objective” side. At the worst this opens a gulf between the objective and subjective dimensions of culture, such that to consider meaning as subjective abstraction renders it entirely mentalistic, and to consider interaction as objective is to treat it as mere behavior. At the best it calls us to explicitly pose the problematic relation of subjectivity and objectivity, and in recognizing the simultaneity of subjective meaning and objective interaction as the dual locus of culture, to reconcile or perhaps necessarily to collapse them upon one another.

My intent in this article is to begin to trace a progression from interaction as inherently meaningful to intersubjectivity, and from intersubjectivity as the co-presence of alter egos to intercorporeality. The purpose of this exercise is to provide for anthropological thinking an alternative to subjectivity as the description of the individual cogito. My strategy will be to reflect on two instances in which the intercorporeal hinge between parties to the interaction is in the hands, and two in which this hinge is in the lips.¹

The laying on of hands

In Charismatic and Pentecostal Christian faith healing, prayer is typically accompanied by the “laying on of hands.” The person or persons acting as healers place their hands, palms open, on the supplicant’s head, or shoulders, or back. Occasionally one hand is placed on the person’s chest and one on the back as if to create an energy polarity running through the body. Sometimes if the prayer is directed toward a particular afflicted part of the supplicant’s body, hands will be imposed on that part, within the limits of dignity. Most often the healer’s hands are still and rest lightly on the person, but sometimes those hands flutter and vibrate with energy, urgency, and intensity. In moments of powerful inspiration, or when the healer is understood to be particularly gifted, participants report heat emanating from the healer’s hands – sometimes it is the healer who reports this experience, sometimes the supplicant, and sometimes both. There is human warmth and care in the touching itself, but this heat is the concrete manifestation of divine healing power.

In Sapir’s terms, imposing hands on a supplicant in prayer is more than a gesture. It is an objective interaction between specific individuals, and the emanation of energy and display of spiritual power are its meaning “on the subjective side”. In this sense the interaction and the interpretation

constitute a dual locus of culture, the objective/behavioral and the subjective/meaningful. What are the consequences of this duality? For one thing, it cannot be said that the invocation of “energy” provides an adequate account of the laying on of hands, for except in the most naive version of symbolic anthropology, to identify a symbol’s meaning does not account for it, and certainly does not explain it. Energy is not an explanatory concept any more than is “spirit”, and to say that one incorporates “energy” in this way is a theological and not an ethnological statement.

To posit a kind of energy, or power, or spirit, is in fact to abstract energy from the interaction and place it squarely on the “subjective side”. In this form, energy is paradoxically a mental entity that may be physically palpable. How are we to put the energy back into the interaction, or more precisely, how can we concretely account for what is abstracted from the interaction as “energy”? I want to turn for help to Paul Ricoeur’s essay on Hegel and Husserl. Here Ricoeur poses the question of whether Husserl’s phenomenology succeeds in doing without the concept of spirit or Geist, and particularly the notion of “objective spirit”, that is a cornerstone of Hegel’s phenomenology of mind. Specifically, Ricoeur asks “Does it succeed in substituting for the latter [i.e., spirit] a concept of intersubjectivity, that is to say, a modality of consciousness free of recourse to any entity superior to consciousness, to a common, collective, or historical spirit?” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 227).

For Ricoeur, the critical principle in Husserl’s theory of intersubjectivity that holds the place of the Hegelian Geist is analogy, specifically the analogy that the alter ego is an ego “like me”. Ricoeur makes a very delicate and absolutely critical point in insisting that Husserl does not use analogy in the sense of reasoning by analogy of the form A is to B as C is to D. This erroneous argument would be stated in the form “what you experience is to the behavior that I am observing as what I experience is to my own outward behavior, resembling yours” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 237), the error being that one can compare lived expressions and observed expressions on the same plane. For Ricoeur, the key to Husserl’s use of analogy is the word “like”, for it is this likeness that ensures that our interpretation of others is

not only immediate, it is recurrent, in the sense that I understand myself on the basis of thoughts, feelings, and actions deciphered directly in the experience of others... [this] use of analogy is built, precisely, on the description of the perception of others as being a direct perception. It is out of this direct reading of emotion in its expression that one must, through explication, bring out the silent analogy that operates in direct perception. (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 237)

Being a subject for oneself is entirely discontinuous with the lived experience of another person, but perceiving another person is radically different from perceiving a thing because it is characterized by a “co-positing” of two subjects

simultaneously, and “[t]his doubling of the subject is the critical point of the analogy” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 238). We are neither isolated cogitos that must bridge a gulf of solipsism nor participants in the same shared subjective substance. We are similar: all others are like me in the sense that all others “are egos just as I am. Like me they can impute their experience to themselves” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 239), and in this sense the words I, you, he, she are equal and analogous (for more on analogy, see Husserl, 1960, Haney, 1994).

The importance of this principle of analogy for empirical research is that phenomenology does not “assume anything other than the analogy of the ego in order to support all the cultural and historical constructions described by Hegel under the heading of spirit, so that phenomenology holds itself to the claim of postulating only the reciprocity of subjects and never a spirit or some additional entity” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 239). Ricoeur uses this analysis not only to combat the notion of an objective spirit or energy but also, by calling Max Weber as an ally and complementary counterpart to Husserl, to combat the illusion or appearance of objectivity accorded to social institutions and by extension any recourse to organic analogies to account for social action (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 243). The argument is that one will encounter only intersubjective relations and never social things, and in this sense the alliance of Husserl and Weber responds simultaneously to the Hegelian spirit and the Durkheimian social. And in finding ourselves on the side of Weber over against Durkheim, we also again find ourselves on the side of Sapir against Kroeber and the superorganic, as well as on the side of ethnology over against theology. The “healing energy of the Spirit” is the product of a world predicated on spirit or Geist. If in a world predicated on intersubjectivity we can postulate only the reciprocity of subjects, then the energy transferred can be explicated in terms of co-existence and co-presence that allows the co-positing of a transcendent alter ego that is the Holy Spirit, at once the concretization of analogy and the emblem of alterity, and thus the condition of possibility of intercorporeality. With the presence of the Holy Spirit in prayer, subjectivity is displaced from its assumed and accustomed locus in an individual, and the deity truly appears in a space “between” its bearer and the participant.

Reaching for the Doorknob

During our lectureship in Rio de Janeiro, my wife and I had a visit to our apartment from a Brazilian student. When the student was about to leave, I accompanied her to the door, she walking ahead of me into a narrow entranceway. Before we reached the door she hesitated for the briefest moment, and I moved past her to open the door. It was the briefest hesitancy of politesse, which I intuited not as an issue of gender etiquette, but in the sense that for Brazilians it might be impolite for a guest to let herself out, or for a host not to open the door for a departing guest. In my culture, or perhaps it is my lack of cultivation, a guest may proceed the host to the door and open that door. The

host might then hold the door as the guest departs. What I intuited at that moment was that my hand, not hers, had to touch the doorknob – thus the hand in this instance is the hinge of intercorporeal reciprocity. Some weeks later we were about to leave the office of a dignitary in a health research institute, when she jumped up, swooped past me to the door through a tight space between me and a filing cabinet and said, “We Brazilians are superstitious, we think that if a guest opens the door for himself it means he will never return”. I was struck to have my earlier intuition confirmed in terms of such an overt and explicit cultural formulation.

In what does such an intuition consist if not the kind of direct, unmediated perception of another discussed by Husserl and elaborated by Ricoeur under the principle of analogy? Is it not evident in this instance that intersubjectivity takes the form of a wordless intercorporeality? On the other hand, wouldn't it be simpler to talk instead about nonverbal communication, or body language, instead of intercorporeality? Simpler, yes, but misleading because it presumes that the nonverbal is structurally analogous to the verbal and can be studied in parallel by means of parallel methods. The problem with using the term “communication” in conjunction with nonverbal is that it focuses our attention on the code, and the problem with using “language” is that it focuses our attention on the grammar, or the system. This analogy is particularly unfortunate in the term “body language”, for that which is nonverbal is precisely not language, and to treat it as if it were is to deny its positive aspect. The alternative is hinted at in a recent work on the relation between body and language by Horst Ruthrof, who says:

Language is empty, it remains without meaning, if it is not associated with its Other, the nonverbal. If we had not learned from earliest childhood, perhaps to some extent even prenatally, how to associate linguistic sounds with nonverbal materials, we would have no meaning... This Other of language is not the world as a set of unmediated data, but rather a fabric of nonverbal signs out of which cultures weave the world the way they see it. (Ruthrof, 2000, pp. 30, 31)

What are the consequences of understanding the nonverbal as “the Other of language” instead of as “body language”? We can shed some light on this question by recalling Walter Benjamin's reflections on similarity. Benjamin identifies the Other of language as tightly bound up with the human capacity not only to perceive but also to generate similarities. It is the mimetic aspect of language, which has developed hand in hand with its other, semiotic aspect, such that “everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language”(Benjamin, 1999, p. 697).

I want to say further that as the Other of language, this capacity to discern and generate similarities in turn informs the principle of analogy that is

fundamental to intersubjectivity. It does so in at least two senses. First, the instances in which we “consciously perceive similarities in everyday life make up a tiny proportion of those numberless cases unconsciously determined by similarity” (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 694–695). Moreover, along with consciously generated similarities as in those produced by imitation, there are what Benjamin calls nonsensuous similarities or correspondences that are less consciously achieved, created, arrived at, or reached, as in the onomatopoeic origin of words and in the correspondences of handwriting to character discriminated by graphology. Second, in the temporal sense, there is a spontaneity and unmediated directness involved such that

The perception of similarity is in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot be held fast as can other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars. The perception of similarities thus seems to be bound to a moment in time. (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 695–696)

... similarities flash up fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to sink down once more. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 698)

As in my encounter at the door, the temporal aspect of the functioning of analogy has two aspects: it is both momentary in duration and dependent on just the right moment in order to appear.

There are mystical, occult, perhaps even theological strains here as elsewhere in Benjamin’s thinking about language. Still, it is not far off for him to say that historically, with reference to disciplines like astrology, “the sphere of life that formerly seemed to be governed by the law of similarity was comprehensive; it ruled both microcosm and macrocosm” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 720). For our purposes, it is enough to observe that the attenuation of a magical understanding of similarity pointed to by Benjamin corresponds precisely to the attenuation of the Hegelian spirit by the Husserlian notion of intersubjectivity. The two moves correspond theoretically in that they point our understanding toward direct recognition of the world and others based on similarity and analogy, and away from an older hermeneutic akin to mind-reading or reading the future in the stars. Moreover, they correspond historically, since Hegel was in closer temporal proximity to the magical world than was Husserl, and it could be said that by hypostatizing an objective world spirit Hegel was providing a philosophical ground for the transhuman macrocosm that equally formed the basis of the magical/theological world view.

Finally, Benjamin suggests that although the mimetic faculty has become attenuated since the time in which the magical world of astrology and alchemy was in ascendance, it has found its way into language such that “language now represents the medium in which objects encounter and come into relation with one another” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 697). Certainly this magical Other remains

present in language, and in this sense Benjamin points out the ambiguity of the word “reading” in its profane semiotic sense (the schoolboy reads his ABC book) and in its magical mimetic sense (the astrologer reads the future in the stars). I will return in my final section to the importance of this observation for understanding language in relation to intercorporeality, but I must pass now to another concrete instance.

The grimace-smile

If a man greets a stranger on the street, a parking attendant as he drives by into a lot, a policeman, or a shopkeeper, one can often observe an interesting gesture, a gesture that sometimes accompanies a verbal greeting and sometimes appears by itself. The gesture is made with the lips, and is neither a smile nor a grimace, but something ambiguously between, a kind of grimace-smile. In the grimace-smile the lips are pressed together into an almost straight line, serving as an acknowledgment of another’s presence that is not quite hostile, not quite friendly, a bit rueful, a bit dignified, a bit apprehensive, a bit defiant. The grimace-smile can be observed in many public places, but it is not a universal gesture. It is, I think, primarily a characteristic of the Euro-American male, and is symptomatic of a quite distinct intercorporeal style.

This gesture can be quite spontaneous, and not an intended part of the greeting. Even when intended, the form it takes is spontaneous. It is this spontaneous form that allows us to consider it part of that nonverbal Other of language and not part of an implicit or explicit body language, and therefore as a constituent in an intercorporeal milieu rather than as an element of communication. It is the projection of a body image that is ambivalent about engagement, that feels democratically obliged to acknowledge the presence of another but at the same time chauvinistically protects its boundaries and interior by presenting lips pressed together as if zipped. If it is preceded by a verbal greeting, it is an immediate and definitive closing. Once it appears the teeth are not bared in either a smiling or a hostile way, and this can be explicated as either emotional ambivalence or the stance that one’s emotions are no one’s business. Insofar as it is a kind of smile itself and not a frown, it is an ambivalent one with the corners of the mouth either straight or turned down, not up. Its mode of presence in the world is that “I have the right to be where I am, and no one has the right to interfere with me”.

Although I have seen newspaper photographs of Europeans making this facial gesture, I want to assert that there is an inherent American-ness in the American grimace-smile, and that in it we can read the same stance that is expressed in contemporary American foreign policy. Doing so does not require us to hypostatize a collective consciousness or a national character, or even to project bodily comportment on an American national will or an imperial spirit of America. Nevertheless, I want at least to point out the importance of

recognizing that intersubjectivity is not only about the micro-interaction of isolated individuals but also about, in Husserl's terms, "...a community of Egos existing with each other and for each other... which, moreover (in its communalized intentionality) constitutes the *one identical world*" (Husserl, 1960, p. 107). On this level, one can observe something similar to the grimace-smile on the faces of public officials (e.g., Bill Clinton or George W. Bush) in the newspapers, where the gesture can be seen to carry connotations such as disdain, arrogance, regret, sympathy, or petulance. There is a clue in these images for understanding the role of embodiment on the broader social stage. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri struggle to incorporate the body in their synthetic analysis of Empire, and succeed in identifying the production of affect as the explicitly corporal dimension of imperial power (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Yet ultimately their analysis remains a matter of power perpetrated on the body and wants for an understanding of Empire itself as an intercorporeal style.² What remains to be done if these insights are to be made relevant to the analysis of global civilization is to bring in an explicit theoretical recognition of intercorporeality as a mode of collective presence in the world.

The chanter's lips

A Navajo chanter of my acquaintance will declaim for extended periods against the contemporary travesty of tape recording sacred songs as a means of learning how to conduct ceremonies. Perpetrators go from ceremony to ceremony conducted by different healers instead of appropriately learning from one mentor over an extended period of time. My initial understanding of why tape recording is unacceptable and inauthentic was in terms of the textuality of the songs and their appropriate treatment. It was a violent taking out of context, an *arrachement*, both tearing the song out of its setting within a moment of performance and wresting it away from its legitimate owner. It was also the imposition of a nontraditional medium inscribing and preserving sacred material that should never be so fixed and frozen. Then the chanter told me something that changed my understanding of his objection. He said that the way it used to be, and the way it should be, was for the person learning the songs to be sitting close enough to the chanter to see his lips move as he sang. With the invocation of moving lips, the song emanating from the bodily portal, power passing by force of breath through the gap of the lips, the apprentice focusing on the action required to bring the chant into intersubjective being, my understanding shifted ground from textuality to embodiment. It careened from context and technological medium to lived spatiality and physical proximity.

What I want to explore in this instance is another aspect of the relation between language and its mute Other critical to an understanding of

intercorporeality. The image of the chanter's lips offers the possibility of going beyond our reticence to attribute grammatical structure to the nonverbal in the guise of body language, and to experiment with the opposite strategy of attributing corporeality to language. Such a strategy exposes the presumption that language is immaterial rather than being a sensuous presence. If it is the case for Benjamin that language has assimilated the mimetic nonverbal such that "language now represents the medium in which objects encounter and come into relation with one another" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 697), this is possible because, as Merleau-Ponty explains, "the structure of [the body's] mute world is such that all the possibilities of language are already given in it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 55). And if Benjamin, as we saw earlier, has told us that the mimetic faculty has become rooted in language and developed in complementarity with its semiotic aspect, Maurice Merleau-Ponty goes a step farther to identify a "fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech and which manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 155)

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes of "our existence as sonorous beings for others and for ourselves", and highlights the sense in which "to understand a phrase is nothing else than to welcome it in its sonorous being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 155). To be precise,

The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of "psychic reality" spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those with ears to hear. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 55)³

To spin out some of the implications of this line of thinking, we can say that the filaments of intentionality that crisscross between and among us humans take sensuous form in language. Speaking is a kind of sonorous touching; language is tissue in the flesh of the world. Or, to be more graphic, think of language as a bodily secretion; and if there is a suspiciously erotic connotation to this proposition, I can only remind you of how we refer to speaking as intercourse, and the double meaning contained therein.

There is a theoretical motive behind this strategy of carnalizing language and allowing us to apprehend its intercorporeal immediacy. Often in writing about the relation between language and experience, or between narrative and experience, there is a tendency to mistrust language's ability to provide access to experience. The reasons given are that speakers can lie about their experience, that they may not possess sufficient linguistic skill to articulate their experience, and that language filters and thereby distorts experience. To play it safe we then say that we can study only language, and never experience. The roots of this mistrust are seldom questioned, but I suggest they are threefold. The first root is a literal reading of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that reality is determined or

created by language, as if language were gifted with agency and its speakers were passive pawns duped by grammar. Related to this is a literal deconstructionism misinterpreted as an excuse never to leave the library because there is only the text, without the corrective that the text is itself part of the flesh of the world. The second root is an implicitly behaviorist theory of language in which an unbridgeable gulf is opened between language as objective behavior or system, and meaning or experience as subjective idiosyncrasy, never considering the aspect of language as intercorporeal encounter.

The third root is what we might call the doctrine of mediacy, that is, that experience is “mediated by” language rather than “given in” language. I would in fact rather call this the fallacy of mediacy: because language can be described as a medium of experience does not mean that it mediates experience by distorting something true but inaccessible. The phrase “words are inadequate to express how I feel” is an example of linguistic ideology, not empirical evidence for a doctrine of mediacy. Heidegger says language can both disclose and obscure experience, but our narrative theory sometimes seems only to acknowledge that it can obscure and distort. Our understanding changes if we recognize that both disclosing and obscuring are accessible to us in direct perception because of our analogous being in relation to others. To reiterate Ricoeur’s qualification of Husserl’s usage, this is not analogy in the sense that your words are to your experience as my words are to my experience. But your words are understandable and open to explication because you are like me, we are alter egos, we both apperceive and project similarity.

A handshake, a kiss goodbye

In her important work on body image, Gail Weiss writes that “To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies” (Weiss, 1999, p. 5). To describe intersubjectivity as intercorporeality, as I have here,⁴ has additional consequences beyond Weiss’s point. First, it helps us avoid the temptation to think of intersubjectivity as an abstract relation between two abstract mental entities. Second, because bodies are already situated in relation to one another, intersubjectivity becomes primary, so that we do not have to begin as did Husserl (1960) from the Cartesian position of the isolated cogito and later arrive at the possibility and necessity of others.⁵ Third, it thereby helps us distance ourselves from the subjective idealism that can be detected in Husserl and that Ricoeur described as “the maleficent side of phenomenology” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 234).

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Notes

- 1 In my vignettes visiting the hands and lips as intercorporeal hinges, I have used instances of dyadic interaction to reflect on intersubjectivity and intercorporeality. I do not intend thereby to minimize the importance of either individual subjectivity or collective intersubjectivity.
- 2 In this broader domain we must distinguish two meanings of subjectivity, both inadequate to our purpose. In reference to the state of being subject to sovereign power, the notion of subjectivity easily excludes experience; understood as a mental or psychological phenomenon, subjectivity privileges the isolated and sovereign cogito, or the “rational man” actor. In both instances, if it is introduced at all intersubjectivity is secondary and added on as a transaction between subjects. In this light it would be important to place the notions of intersubjectivity and intercorporeality in dialogue with Foucault, for whom subjectivity is taken in both senses simultaneously. Individual subjectivity is shared and hence becomes collective to the extent that it is formed under similar conditions for all subjects of a discursive regime. But this view does not necessarily account for interaction – collective subjectivity can still be (and under some conditions must be?) the sum of the subjectivities of isolated individuals.
- 3 The next sentence reads: “And conversely the whole landscape is overrun with words as with an invasion, it is henceforth but a variant of speech before our eyes, and to speak of its ‘style’ is in our view to form a metaphor” (1964, p. 55). Note that this nonverbal landscape is explicitly a variant and not an analogue of speech; and that it has a style only in a metaphorical sense, a sense we project on it as intercorporeal beings.
- 4 Another approach linking intersubjectivity and intercorporeality at the intersection of philosophy and sociology is elaborated by Crossley (1996).
- 5 Husserl arrived at intersubjectivity by showing the impossibility of solipsism, and “...that one and the same world is common to us without being multiplied as many times as there are consciousnesses” (Ricoeur 1991, p. 235), freeing us to start with intersubjectivity in the first place.

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