

## Experiencing Michael: Sullivan's Modes of Sentience

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Harry Stack Sullivan proposed a developmental model of sentience, of "any...primary data of experience" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 28). This article uses theory and case study examples to explore Sullivan's developmental model in two ways. First, the scope of applicability of the model is extended to everyday experience. Second, using Sullivan's other developmental theories as analogy, extension of his theory of sentience is drawn to a natural conclusion, incorporating the more contemporary notion of intersubjectivity.

Harry Stack Sullivan proposed a developmental model of sentience, of "any...primary data of experience" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 28). The experience of something is not simply the event that occurs or in which the person participates, but the meaning that the individual attaches to that event. Sentience itself is the data from which we come to have information, to know experience. In his model, Sullivan proposes three modes of experience which develop as a function of both the quantity and quality of the elaboration of which one has had contact with events in one's life. His model was proposed as a development that progresses over time; in his model, infants operate primarily in the first mode of sentience, and with experience over time, progress through to the highest mode of sentience. The present paper will illustrate and then elaborate on Sullivan's theory of sentience using case examples from the writer's own work of how an adult man named Michael is experienced.

Sarah looks up at Michael, who to her is not quite a person, not anything but an overwhelming feeling of warmth and relaxation. The calmness that overwhelms Sarah is like sunlight, the calm soothing warmth and safety of the sun's light and warmth enveloping her little body. She experiences Michael in terms of nothing but this overwhelming feeling he brings over her.

Sullivan termed the first mode of sentience the *protaxic* mode. The earliest and simplest of the modes of experience, the experience of early infancy, the protaxic mode "may be regarded as the discrete series of momentary states of the sensitive organism" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 29), undifferentiated and unintegrated feelings. All that Sarah knows when expe-

riencing Michael are momentary states, with no integration of time involved. Not an entity separate from the world, Sarah is experiencing Michael only as a sense, only as the global impact he has on her. Sarah's "felt experience is all of a piece, undifferentiated, without definite limits" (Mullahy, 1948, p. 286). In general, Sarah's experience of Michael is based solely on her sensitivity, that is, her capacity for sensation in her body. This earliest phase of sentience quickly gives way to the subsequent stages, however, by which it is "overlaid" (Sullivan, 1972, p. 37).

Rachel sees Michael and experiences him first and foremost as a male figure with predominantly feminine qualities, a seeming paradox to her. His ambiguous gender and sexual nature impacts Rachel in a way that makes her feel she can connect to him, relate to him on a female level. With jet-black hair, Michael looks mixed-race, beautiful but small. His small stature and demeanor strikes Rachel in his overwhelming lack of aggression and masculinity. She experiences Michael as a man, small and feminine, not unlike her own mother, with whom she can connect deeply.

Sullivan's second mode of experience, predominating the child's experience, is the *parataxic* mode. Also crude, like the protaxic mode, the parataxic mode is the state "about which something can be known, but which is somewhat harder to discuss" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 29). Based on crude categorizations and broad stereotypy, Rachel's experience of Michael is based on his categorization: his gender, his stature, his appearance. As a man, he would most likely be threatening, but his effeminate qualities liken him to other females, with whom she has an easier and freer time connecting. Still without a clear continuity, Rachel's experience progresses in time but is unconnected and still poorly formulated. The distinction of Michael as a man does not encroach upon her experience of his feminine qualities. To Rachel, Michael is wholly a woman, even though a moment

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passed when he was a man. These “‘parts,’ the diverse aspects, the various kinds of experience are not related or connected in a logical fashion” (Mullahy, 1948, p. 288). Her experience of Michael is based completely on how she relates to others with whom Michael shares his categorizations of stature and quality, and to a lesser degree gender and race.

Victoria relates to Michael as an individual. Beyond his race, gender, and stature, she experiences his impact on her, his talkative, “like a girl” nature, his interest in her and her interests. Victoria feels he is insightful, analytical, and extremely friendly toward her. She feels that he is “just like one of [her] girlfriends,” those with whom she shares her most intimate thoughts, who understand and will not judge her. Victoria experiences Michael as a friend, a distinct individual with individual characteristics in relation to herself.

Sullivan’s final mode of sentience, the *syntactic* mode, represents the point where the child can finally understand the “‘consensually validated’ meaning of language—in the widest sense of language” (Mullahy, 1948, p. 291). The child begins to be able to discern the finer distinctions between people. Victoria experiences Michael truly as an individual, though always in relation to herself, how he relates to her. Relating to him beyond crude categorizations and assumptions, Victoria is able to symbolize Michael in terms of more individualized language, able to describe him beyond global feelings (i.e., protaxic) and gross associations (i.e., parataxic). Victoria’s characterization of Michael is completely understandable by others and often consistent with others’ understanding of him—“Consensually validated symbol activity involves an appeal to principles which are accepted as true by the hearer” (Mullahy, 1948, p. 291). Sullivan’s theory of sentience ends with this mode of experience.

Maria knows Michael quite differently than the other three; she experiences him as a true subjective other, in terms of his own experience, rather than just his impact on her. A true friend to her, she is also a true friend to him, listening to his problems. Michael knows that Maria is studying psychology, so he supports her with mutually beneficial results, by offering his problems for her to help him understand. They have a friendship and a bond that is understood only by the two of them. Maria experiences Michael in terms of not only what he means to her, but also what she means to him and what they mean together.

Although Sullivan never added a fourth phase to his developmental theory of sentience, the experience of *in-*

*tersubjectivity* seems to describe a further development in experience and sentience. Intersubjectivity, reflecting a contemporary, postmodern view not addressed in Sullivan’s time, incorporates the idea that two individuals in a relationship share more than just the two individuals bring to the interaction; two subjects co-create a reality that is shared only between them, in which they are both agents, both subjects (Aron, 1991). Beyond experiencing Michael as only an object, understood only in terms of what he means to her, only experienced in globally consensually validated language, Maria and Michael share an intersubjective bond, an experience in a language that cannot be fully understood by anyone else. This language is intersubjectively consensually agreed upon (i.e., formulated), only between the two of them. Their relationship (which is the primary way Maria experiences Michael) is “continually established and reestablished through ongoing mutual influence in which both...affect, and are affected by, each other” (Aron, 1991, p. 33). Beyond Maria and Michael existing only as individuals to whom the other is merely an object, their relationship, the “intersubjective analytic third” (Ogden, 1994, p. 4), has become an entity unto itself, with its own language. Sullivan’s stages of sentience ended at the ability to use and understand globally consensually agreed upon language; this proposed fourth stage adds the ability to integrate both global and interpersonal consensual languages.

### Non-Developmental Development

The above case studies of Michael and how girls of different ages and different developmental stages experience him is actually not a collection of four different children at different ages. In fact, the vignettes above were taken from a single interview with an adult woman (I will call her Julie), who was asked to recall the process of meeting and getting to know a single person, Michael. Although Sullivan intended his theory as a macro-level, stage theory of development (the primacy of the earlier modes “tend[s] to disappear” [Sullivan, 1972, p. 33] with the development of the later modes), it seems that the “development” process through these four modes occurs consistently throughout life, on a micro-level. The process Julie went through with Michael is typical of the process she (as well as most other people) goes through when meeting and getting to know anyone. Although the idea of sentience may not have been intended toward the micro-level social and interpersonal realms, its practical applicability is precisely to those realms to which Sullivan was dedicated in the majority of his work.

### Extension of Theory

Sullivan proposed several developmental stage theories in his writings. Because of the parallel nature of his theories (he presented many of them as analogous), his theory of

sentience development can be placed in the context of his other theories to be evaluated. Whereas his developmental theory of sentience only had three stages (modes), each of his other major developmental theories contained four distinct stages. The extension of sentience into the intersubjective realm is a logical extension when comparing his theory of sentience to his other developmental theories.

### *Biological Development: Analogy*

Biologically, Sullivan was interested in the characteristic behaviors of organisms, developmentally enumerated. The behaviors he equates with different organisms, though they can be seen in higher organisms, are those behaviors which are predominant in each organism's existence. Lower behaviors predominating in higher organisms are a sign of pathology. Beginning with unicellular organisms, the lowest form of biological behavior is associated with protista (protophyta and protozoa). Protista maintain "functional activity with and within a relatively very simple environment" (Sullivan, 1972, p. 29). All behavior is based on biological needs, and energy is mostly expended in a conservative manner. In humans, pathological autism and psychomotor slowing are evidence of the pathological nature of this protista activity predominating higher organisms.

Sullivan was less clear and specific about the nature of the behavior that predominates plant life, the second biological state of development. In humans, plant behavior can be seen in "phenomena that occur in the borderline conditions which we speak of variously as 'light sleep,' sleep with dreams, panic states, night terrors, and the like" (Sullivan, 1972, p. 29). Seemingly, the behavior that predominates in plants is one of fantasy. The third phase of biological development can be seen in animals, which have "relative freedom from spatial limitations" (Sullivan, 1972, p. 30). Vocalization is a predominant tool of use in animal communication.

Sullivan's final biological stage of development is human, characterized by both "consciousness" and "self-consciousness" (Sullivan, 1972, p. 30). Able to think abstractly, learn by representation, and understand their own part within a system, humans have the capacity to be both adjustive and creative. Sullivan wrote of humans' ability to perform "self-conscious acts" (Sullivan, 1972, p. 31) as their overt characteristic activity. What he may also have accounted for had he incorporated intersubjectivity (had he been writing several decades after he was) is humans' ability to perform intersubjectively-conscious acts, to consider not only the consequences to oneself, but also to the other and to the relationship between them.

### *Skill Development*

Sullivan posited a theory of the evolution of humans' "central integrative apparatus" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 20), which basically consists of a development of cognitive

skills. Beginning with no skills except sensation, without a sense of agency, and without the ability to attach meaning to sensations, this first stage represents a point at which no skills have been learned. A relatively short period (because, as Sullivan asserts, even without the influence of culture humans would most likely "be an exceedingly gifted member of the biological series" [Sullivan, 1953, p. 20], able to learn and adapt relatively quickly to the environment), this first stage of skill development contributes significantly to the second stage.

The second stage of skill development, entirely dependent on the success of the first stage (i.e., without any sensation, this second stage would not be able to form), is the integration of sensation and motor skills in response to that sensation. This second skill phase represents an acquisition of agency, the ability to react to positive or negative sensations. Specifically, Sullivan emphasizes the importance of a single relationship, "the interrelation of vision and the prehensile hands" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 20). Because of the communicative nature of the hands (in preverbal children, the hands are one of "the greatest tools of interrelation" [Sullivan, 1953, p. 20]), as well as their distinctly human nature, this relationship between hands and vision is one of the most agentive acquisitions in children. This motoric agency constitutes the second milestone in the development of the central integrative apparatus.

The third stage of skill development is "the interrelation of hearing and the voice-producing apparatus" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 20), which ultimately gives rise to the capacity for language. A prerequisite for understanding consensually agreed upon language, this integration of hearing and vocalizing represents the next major milestone in agency and communication. The final stage, "the interrelation of these and all other receptor-effector systems in an exceedingly complicated forebrain, which permits operating with many kinds of abstracts of experience" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 20), is the point at which humans gain the capacity of abstraction and representation. The most complex cognitive abilities constitute what Sullivan felt to be the most advanced, "human" activities possible. These include the ability to anticipate outcomes, the cognitive "testing" of situations before their actuation, and the application of similar situations to others.

### *Internal Experience Development*

Sullivan proposed a development of the predominant internal experience as another meaningful developmental theory. Beginning with "primitive implicit processes" (Sullivan, 1972, p. 33), to which Sullivan refers as the exclusive content of thought in early infancy, the human child quickly progresses to fantasy and fantastic mentation. This fantasy is as difficult to define and even imagine as the primitive processes, because of both the lack of memory of very early infancy and the relative infrequency of primitive processes after infancy. Thus, Sullivan only defines fantasy (or "revery") as "all those lying between the primitive and the

highest type of implicit process, which [is] ‘externally controlled’” (Sullivan, 1972, p. 34).

The third stage, which Sullivan defines as “reality controlled” (Sullivan, 1972, p. 32), is the capacity for adjustive thought. Sullivan proposes this stage as “a *conscious* education of relations discriminated on multiple bases of experience with other people and things” (Sullivan, 1972, p. 35). This capacity to adjust one’s associations from personal to globally consensually validated is the essence of adjustive mentation. The final stage, also consciously chosen and influenced by reality, is the capacity for creative mentation. A seeming merger between the fantastic and the reality-controlled, creative thought is novel, individual thought that “can be subjected to preparation for consensual validation” (Sullivan, 1972, p. 36). This final stage of development is not wholly *dependent on* reality and the environment, but is *productive toward* that reality and environment.

*External Action Development*

A developmental theory that closely parallels his development of internal mentation and experience is Sullivan’s developmental theory of external action, those skills that predominate action in different developmental stages. The first stage is purely reflexive, innate impulsive acts, which Sullivan calls “total reflexes” (Sullivan, 1972, p. 33). Again, relatively quick to learn, humans acquire the second stage rather quickly. This second stage is constituted of action that is impulsive. Highly “plastic” (Sulli-

van, 1972, p. 33), these impulses are modified by experience, unlike reflexes, which are innate and enacted without association.

The third and fourth stages of external action development are the capacity for consciously conditioned acts and the capacity for self-conscious acts, respectively. The latter much more reflective, both represent actions that are consciously chosen. Consciously conditioned acts are associated with adjustive mentation; self-conscious acts represent an understanding of the role of the self within a larger system, as well as the system on the self, associated with creative thought. This last stage of action development is indicative of the uniquely intersubjective nature of humans.

*Comparison and Extension*

Table 1 shows a comparative schematic formulation of Sullivan’s five developmental theories. Comparing Sullivan’s developmental theory of sentience to each of his other developmental theories reveals a significant shortcoming in the elaboration of modes of experience. The analogies of the biological stage of Man, the skill development stage of abstraction and representation, the internal experience of creative thinking, and the predominance of self-conscious acts imply that experience develops beyond an understanding of the globally consensually validated meaning of language, the syntactic mode.

Table 1  
*Sullivan’s Developmental Stage Theories*

Biology <sup>a</sup>	Skills <sup>b</sup>	Internal Experience <sup>a</sup>	External Action <sup>a</sup>	Sentience <sup>b</sup>
Protista	Sensory	Primitive processes	Reflexive	Protaxic
Plants	Integration of sensory and motor—agency	Fantasy	Impulsive	Parataxic
Animals	Integration of hearing and vocalization	Adjustive Thinking	Consciously conditioned acts	Syntactic
Man	Abstraction and representation	Creative Thinking	Self-conscious acts	<i>(Intersubjective)</i>

<sup>a</sup> Taken and adapted from Sullivan, 1972.

<sup>b</sup> Taken and adapted from Sullivan, 1953.

## SULLIVAN'S MODES OF SENTIENCE

The analogy of humans as a “step up” from animals implies a “step up” from consensually agreed upon forms of communications, which have been empirically shown to be present in many species of animals. The augmentation would be not only to know, understand, and use communication that can be globally understood, but to be able to convey thoughts and feelings that cannot be understood fully via the use of conventional language (“unformulated experiences” [Stern, 1997, p. 33]) to others. The only “language” that would be effective is an intersubjectively created (formulated) language, in which words have a specific meaning to the dyad involved that would not translate easily to the globally consensually agreed upon form of language.

Similarly, the analogies of cognitive skill development and internal experience seem to demand a mode beyond understanding consensually agreed upon language. The third phase of skill development, the integration of hearing and vocalization, is the prerequisite for this understanding. Adjustive thinking is defined in terms of adjusting one's understanding of language to fit the language of the world. The final stages of each, the capacity for representation and abstraction and the capacity for creative thought, necessarily go beyond globally consensually agreed upon language. The ability for the creation of intersubjectively agreed upon meanings and language is absolutely dependent on the capacity for creativity and abstraction by the dyad involved. Moreover, the development of predominant external action supports an additional stage of sentience, progressing from consciously conditioned acts, which are adjustive by nature (such as altering one's own language system to match “reality's”

language), to self-conscious acts, which necessitate representation and creative thought.

Because Sullivan's theories of development are so intertwined and dependent upon one another, his theory of sentience needs slight revision to parallel his other theories. Had Sullivan theorized somewhat later in the century than he did, it is likely that he would have taken into account the notion of intersubjectivity into his theory of experience. Julie's experience of Michael went far beyond what could be expressed with consensually agreed upon language, beyond the syntactic mode of sentience. Intersubjectivity seems to offer Sullivan's theory a convenient, congruent resolution in the context of his other theories of development.

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