Making the Relational Field Visible

A Transdisciplinary Map of Relational Awareness for Health Systems

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Health systems are social systems through which technical functions are carried out. Existing scholarship addresses relationality through social, organizational, and structural lenses, but the biological and physiological dimensions of interaction remain largely outside the frame, leaving invisible the mechanisms through which everyday interaction shapes what people can perceive, coordinate, and do together.

KEY MESSAGES

01 Substantial evidence for relational dynamics in health systems exists across disciplines but remains siloed, and the biological and physiological dimensions of interaction remain largely outside the frame.

02 The Map of Relational Awareness weaves three scientific streams in a perceptual scaffold, with two poles and six movements, intended to make relational dynamics visible in real time.

03 Empirical collaboration is invited to test reliable recognition of the six movements and whether the Map can generate an integrated account of relational capacity to help health and care workers recognize and navigate relational dynamics in practice.



THE GAP

Across several bodies of research, substantial evidence links the quality of relationships to patient safety, clinical outcomes and workforce performance and sustainability. Relational Coordination Theory, social connection research, compassion research in clinical care, and trauma-informed approaches each demonstrate this from different angles. Yet these literatures remain largely separated by discipline and level of analysis. They are rarely brought together in a form that helps health workers recognize and navigate the complex relational dynamics unfolding in and shaping everyday practice.



THE MAP

The Map is a proposed transdisciplinary perceptual scaffold consisting of two poles and six movements designed to make the relational dynamics of real-time interaction more visible and workable.

Awareness: The internal organization from which interaction is perceived and met.

Expression: How that organization becomes perceptible and consequential between people.

The six movements describe simultaneous, interdependent dimensions of relational activity that are not always consciously recognized.

All the relational elements named by the Map are shaped by hierarchy, working conditions, and whose voice can be heard, not only by individual state.

ORIGINS

The Map's two poles and six movements emerged through more than two decades of public health practice, including WHO emergency response and community engagement. Direct observation, scientific learning and somatic practices continually informed one another. As understanding developed within practice, relational dynamics became increasingly recognizable and could be named. The Map took shape through this ongoing inquiry, giving language to what was unfolding within interactions and the conditions shaping it.

The Map advances the relational orientation of the WISH-WHO Policy Report on Relationality in Community Engagement (2024) by turning towards the dynamics of everyday interaction.

SCIENTIFIC GROUNDING

The Map draws on three converging scientific streams that together illuminate how internal state, relational experience, and communication shape one another in real time.

Polyvagal Theory

Porges: autonomic state shapes how the nervous system detects cues of safety and threat beneath conscious awareness, influencing perception, social engagement, and the capacity for connection before deliberate thought occurs. (Porges, 2011; 2022)

Interpersonal Neurobiology

Siegel: physiological and psychological organization develops within ongoing relational experience. Nervous systems are not isolated; they shape one another continuously through interaction. (Siegel, 2020)

Communication Complex

Communication is increasingly understood as a bioactive process: not merely an exchange of information, but a medium capable of altering physiological state within and across an interaction. Consequently, every interaction is an intervention. (Parrish-Sprowl & Parrish-Sprowl, 2023)

INVITATION TO COLLABORATE

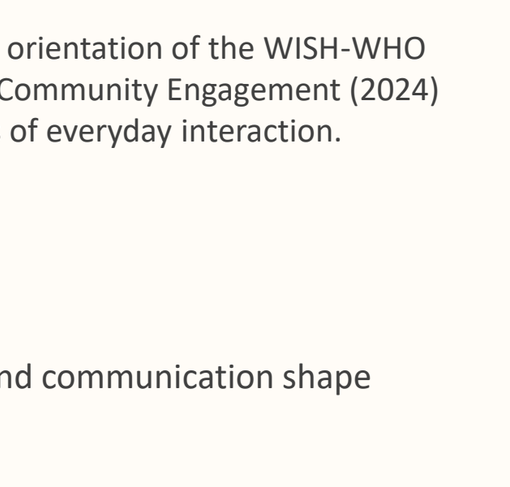
This poster proposes the Map of Relational Awareness as a non-pathologizing, testable integrative scaffolding.

It invites collaboration to examine:

- Whether the six movements can be reliably recognized.
- How they interact with relational quality across clinical, team, and organizational contexts.
- Whether the Map can help generate an integrated empirical account of relational capacity in health systems.

Collaboration is welcomed across disciplines, including nursing science, health communication, organizational research, and quality improvement.

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Presented at the Geneva Health Forum 2026 © 2026 Asiya Odugleh-Kolev