

Practical Book Review: Siegel

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Summary

Siegel's book (2021) details how the thorough interaction of experimental and constitutional factors establishes the development of the human mind in an integrative process. Hence, the mind is both embodied and relational. It is a complex system emerging from the flow of energy and information. Siegel suggests that the four facets of the mind are; subjective experience, consciousness, information processing, and self-organization. As a complex system, the mind regulates its emergence recursively from embodied and relational information.

Siegel's theory explains several tenets of psychology and psychiatry. Reflecting the mind's experience, synaptic networks are formed as neurological patterns of information as a self-organizational process. These patterns influence the mind's interactions with its environment and reinforce its own history. Neural circuits of activation are formed as the representations of mental states, and the differentiation and linkage of these circuits are the basic mechanisms for modeling the environment and developing it as a continuously adaptive system. Suboptimal attachment and trauma cause fear and shame to become as frozen, isolated states and models of the mind. These models may cause rigidity and chaos, and meditative practices and psychotherapy are ways to reintegrate them into a more harmonious flow of functioning. Differentiation and linkage are part of integration and critical to developing resilience and psychological well-being. According to Siegel, emotion has a central role

in integration and self-regulation by connecting the internal and interpersonal processes of the mind throughout the lifetime. Neuroplasticity is the neurobiological mechanism allowing the reorganization and self-regulation of neural patterns across the human life.

Response

The excessive activation of the overly differentiated DMN (Default Mode Network) is associated with self-preoccupation, anxiety, and depression. Siegel talks about the importance of the integration of the DMN with the lateral areas of the brain. The lateral areas are responsible for immersion, insight, empathy, and compassion. Nodes of the DMN help us to make sense of the world, and the lateral areas support our empathic connection with our experiences.

In my dance and movement therapy group, we danced to shamanic and tribal ambient music in pairs or in small groups, using only a small set of simple instructions, e.g., how close we could get or the size of the area we could use. The music evoked emotions from the past, but the movement kept us in the moment while we stayed connected with each other in a free-flowing, spontaneous way. In my interpretation, we experienced a form of meditation, integration, and rewiring of the brain. Having the group offered the opportunity to connect, resonate, and attach with others in new ways, while the music also activated old emotional patterns as they emerged from a mental state similar to meditation. At the verbal circle, we discussed and tried to give

meaning to our physical and emotional experiences during more than three hours of dance, and we received gentle and emphatic feedback from others. It was a two-year process, dancing twice every week, and I felt I was transformed by the end. Our two psychodynamically trained therapists danced with us and just like the other dancers, we used them as symbolic parents, siblings, and friends unconsciously. Siegel doesn't use the word unconscious, but I consider the unconscious patterns part of the mental models or schemas we built based on our past interpersonal experiences, attachment patterns, traumas, and genetic makeup. Experimenting with connections expressed with movement only, it seemed that we triggered and rewired these old patterns in a higher level of integration. The verbal circle must have taken us back to the DMN, understanding and creating a theory of mind about our dance experiences. During the dance, I also felt what Siegel describes as the self being a verb-like, unfolding phenomenon. The information in the form of thoughts and feelings coming from inside and the connections formed with the rhythm and through the movement with the group seemed to be the flow of energy and information Siegel describes. In his words, identity is both "inner and inter," and I felt that I had the chance to experience both through a free flow of connection and disconnection with others. My identity changed as I developed new ways of connecting with others. At our first sessions, I was surprised by how others enjoyed an intense and deep interaction with others. Their ways of moving with the group seemed very different and difficult to me. There was one session that we could ask the group to create an interaction, a scene that was just

for us. I asked everyone to move away to the sides of the room and walked through between them alone. In our last session, we repeated this exercise, and I asked the group to create a tight circle where I connected with everyone. I also received feedback from the group about how differently they felt around me: resonance, attunement, and connection were at another level. But I also felt good, as Siegel states, that integration of the mind is the key to psychological well-being. The music, the movement, the emotional states surfacing in this setting, and the relational experience must have triggered different parts of my brain, and talking about these experiences, making sense of them, and creating a narrative in a gentle, caring environment seems to be the perfect setting for an integrative process.

Had I known more about the significance of the nine levels of integration (consciousness, bilateral, vertical, memory, narrative, state, interpersonal, temporal, and identity) at the beginning of my sport career, I would have invested more time in creating the environments, circumstances and relationships promoting this kind of integration. I would have noticed and understood the mental states of rigidity or chaos and could have asked for help to restore and improve my inner and outer connectedness, my level of differentiation and linkage.

At times, when I overidentified with my results as an athlete, I needed to differentiate my identity from my sport. I would have been more selective about who I was going to work with. Toxic environments are focusing on the ME vs. MWE, and it is imperative to avoid these unless we can change them. I would have asked for

professional help to create a healthy narrative and helped me to perform and build my future, and I would have put a lot more emphasis on my personal relationships with my family, friends, teachers, and coaches, knowing that ruptures are inevitably part of relationships and repair is always necessary, possible and takes work. My emotional connection with others is functionally the same as my inner connection to myself and the connection of my neural patterns, with this connectivity being central to my optimal cognitive and psychological functioning.

Reflection

The book reinforced my belief that meditation is a practice that supports the development and healthy function of the mind. It also reinforced my belief that we humans are interconnected in a much deeper and more meaningful way than our society and capitalism let us believe. Globalization, the internet and modern media bring humans of different continents to believe that our lives and our future are intertwined with each other and with our natural environment. I experienced many “ah ha” moments as I started to think about how the Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) model can be applied in education and youth sports. Personal relationships, resonance, and attunement are critical factors for interpersonal and intrapersonal integration that foster healthy development. The key message of Siegel’s model is that the flow of information is needs to be paired with resonance and attunement, great

narratives, communities with systems thinking, and awareness of the mental models we work with individually and as a community.

It is interesting that my experience as a child in a communist society and some of my parents' views apparently made me more open to Siegel's idea of the "mwe". I lived in a society where competition was less of a priority; people were less primed to get ahead of each other and more willing to collaborate; it was, in many ways, a pleasant experience. I won championships as an athlete because my presence and my general approach put the interest of my team first and my own interest second. In retrospect, I recognized the importance of "mwe vs. we" early on. My involvement in sport, dance therapy, and meditation helped me discover a more holistic view of how I can be happy individually and as part of a group. However, underestimating the importance of my personal relationships at times, I experienced hardship and setbacks in my personal development. After this course, I celebrate that empirical evidence of neuroscience supports my experiences and intuitions about development and spirituality. I will study and use Siegel's book extensively as it is an invaluable resource to support my sport psychology interventions.

Action

Other than schools, youth sports is the second largest community arena for children's education and development. Siegel states that the "mind arises from the interaction of bodily and relational processes." The self, in part, is relational, and its development relies on and is thoroughly tied to other minds and their models of the

world. The quality of these models and these relationships is critical to the development of healthy cognitive and emotional functions of an individual. In the realm of youth sports, it is evident that coaches have a vital impact on growth and psychological well-being. We must welcome the fact the sports culture is changing; authoritarian, coercive, “old-school” coaching styles are becoming less and less observable and accepted. However, the old mental models of sport live on, and these mental models have little consideration for children's psychological well-being and cognitive development. I believe that educating coaches and parents about the importance of Siegel’s IPNB and the benefits of meditative practices in the sports domain is critical for shaping healthy self-regulation and the long-term success of young athletes. Part of this education, especially for coaches, is to improve their level of self-awareness. As an example, it is beneficial for coaches to understand the importance of differentiating and linking the different states and identities they have as educators, caretakers, coaches, parents, professionals, etc. To make them notice and cultivate their need to step away from their athletic identity and take the time for their “inner-state” integration (because competition can become obsessive and all-consuming for coaches and athletes alike).

Another aspect of the IPNB mindset that sports programs at all levels shall nurture is the mindset of systems thinking. A culture of any club or school YD program (YDP) that is aware of the interconnectedness of all shareholders is one that considers the broad consequences of the actions of all constituents and accommodates a

system that promotes, guides, and rewards this information at all levels of its operation. A great example of this was the competitive basketball tryouts of the local high school's YDP that comprised three two-hour training-tryout sessions for sixty nervous and eager sixth graders, most of whom were in the same middle school, tackling the identity vs. role confusion phase. The varsity coach was present and explained to the parents that at the end of the tryouts, the coaches would talk individually with all the kids who had not been selected, showing appreciation for their talent and effort, praising them, and explaining what skills they could improve to make the team next year. All the players and their parents are part of this community; they see each other on the court and in school. The consequences of the shame and pain they felt for not being selected could have impacted this community and its integration for years to come. This practice was a good example of systems thinking, and one of the activities

My plan as a sport psychology professional is to promote activities like this in organizations that need to build a better and more integrative sport culture. Assessing the results of these actions can be measured at many levels of the organizations. The overall level of satisfaction and well-being of all stakeholders is a variable I expect to improve. The performance of these organizations is also expected to get better over time. The number of conflicts between team members, parents, and coaches, even the number of injuries, may decrease.

Siegel's IPNB approach also highlights the importance of personal and community narratives as a way of integrating interpretations, beliefs, values, and

mental models into a coherent story that serves as the trusted, congruent foundation for behavior and culture. As an SP consultant, it is my mission to facilitate the communication and understanding essential for constructing these narratives, which integrate the cognitive analytical with the invisible, more holistic information available at both the personal and organizational levels. A synergy of integration creates a balanced harmony between linkage and differentiation, and an organization can avoid stagnation, chaos, or rigidity.

References

Siegel, D. J. (2020). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (3rd ed.). The Guilford Press.