Relational Intelligence (RQ)

Building a Relational Future in the Age of AI

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We stand at a **pivotal moment** in human evolution.

The question is not whether AI will advance. *It will*.

The question is whether we will **intentionally cultivate** the **relational intelligence** that makes those advances serve **human flourishing**.

The Evolution of **Human Intelligence**

Biological Intelligence
Brain expansion, tool use, survival.
Australopithecus and early Homo habilis

Symbolic & Linguistic Intelligence
Language, abstract thought, culture. Homo sapiens

Civilizational Intelligence
Agriculture, cities, writing system.

Artificial & Hybrid Intelligence
Digital age, advanced AI

7–2 million years ago

2 million–200,000 years ago

200,000–40,000 years ago

40,000 years ago–10,000 BCE

10,000 BCE–1800 CE

1800–2000 CE

2000 CE–present

21st century onward

Social Intelligence
Fire mastery, cooperation, teaching. Homo erectus

Cultural Intelligence
Knowledge accumulation, learning, trade

Analytical Intelligence
Science, industry, data-driven solutions

Relational Intelligence?
Compassion, ethics, global collaboration, individual and collective flourishing

> What if intelligence has always been about who we become **together**?

Today's **Journey**

1

The Science of Human Relationships

Understanding how love builds the brain's architecture for learning

2

The AI Revolution & Relational Crisis

How artificial intelligence is reshaping human connection and learning

3

The Relational Intelligence (RQ) Era

Building relationship-centered approaches in the age of AI: Relational Intelligence (RQ) and relational infrastructure

The Science of **Human Relationships**

We are all born **billionaires**

Every infant enters the world with **100 billion neurons**, ready to form trillions of connections through relationships, also called serve and return interactions (Shonkoff)

Early Relationships Shape **Brain Architecture**

Romanian Orphanages Studies

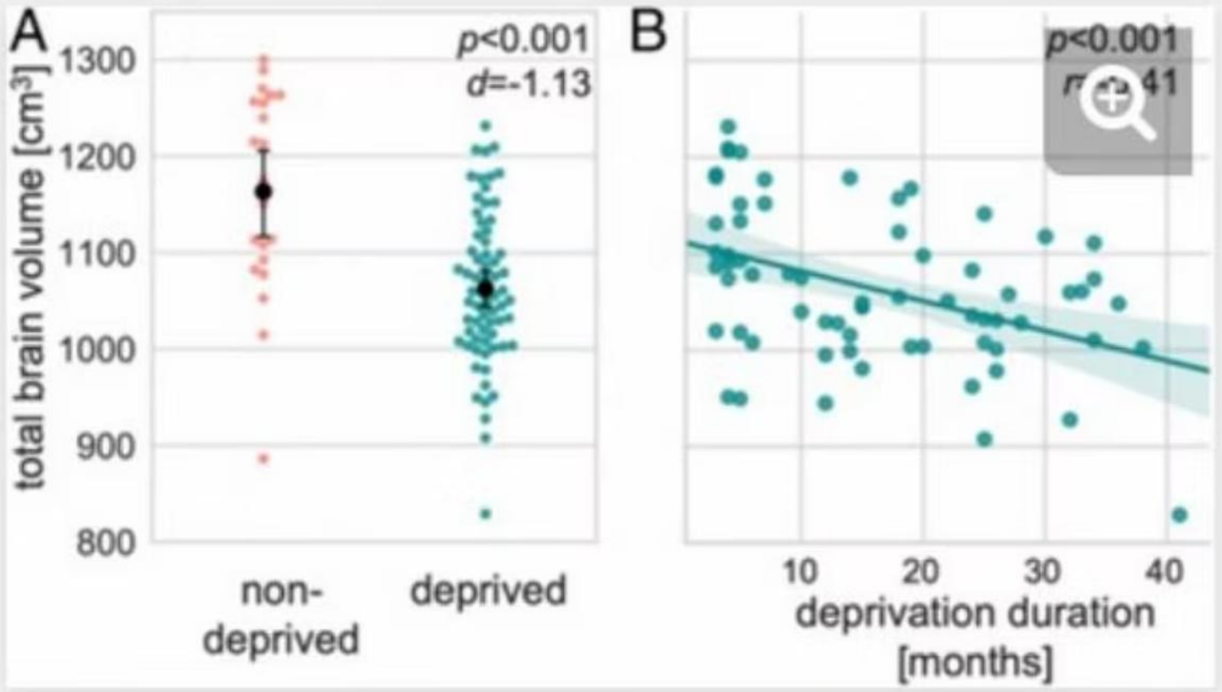
(Fox, Neslon, Sonuga-Barke, Rutter)

Children deprived of early relationships showed:

- Lower brain volume and power
- Reduced emotional regulation
- Impaired cognitive development

Washington University Study (Luby)

Nurturing makes a difference: Children with high maternal support showed 10% larger hippocampus.



Our Brains Evolved for **Relationships**

Default Network Active at Birth (Lieberman)

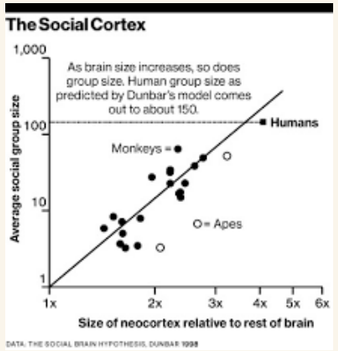
Even two-day-old infants activate social connection networks

Brain Synchrony During Interaction (Kuhl)

Mother-child brains synchronize during verbal interaction, creating shared neural patterns

Social Brain Hypothesis (Dunbar)

Our large neocortex evolved to navigate the complexity of human relationships



Relationships and **Learning/Academic Success**

Teacher-Child Relationship

0.57 effect size on academic success

Teacher closeness rivals top instructional interventions *(Hamre & Pianta)*

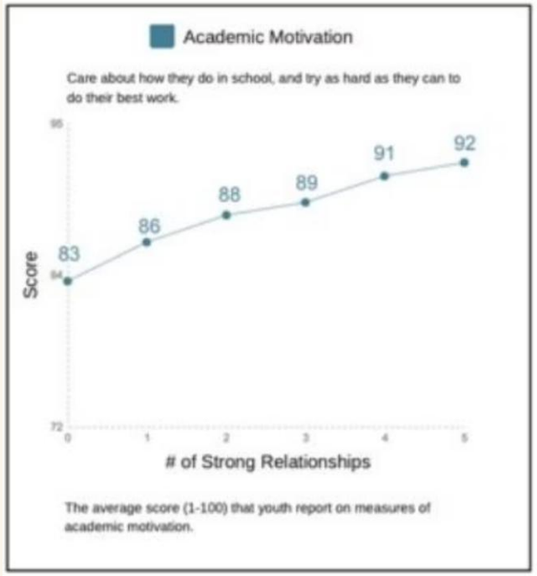
Peer Relationships

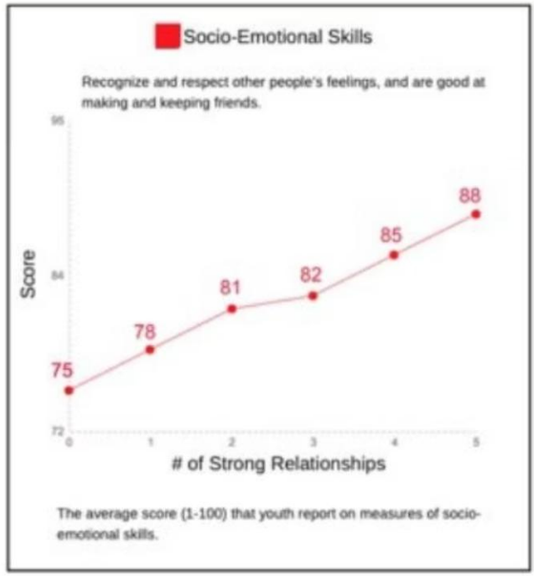
Lonely teens are **22% more likely** to get lower grades (*WHO)*

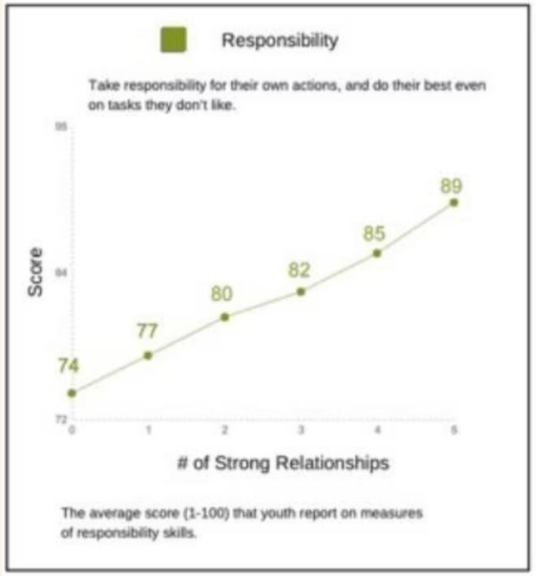
A friend in Kindergarten predicts later academic motivation *(Ladd et al.)*

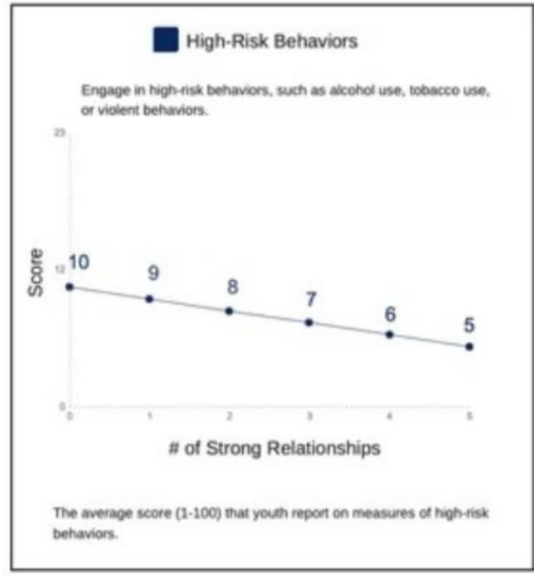
Number of Strong Relationships

More strong relationships = greater academic motivation & skills *(Search Institute)*









Relationship and **Wellbeing**

12x

Flourishing Boost

Strong child-parent connection increases odds of curiosity and flourishing (Bethel)

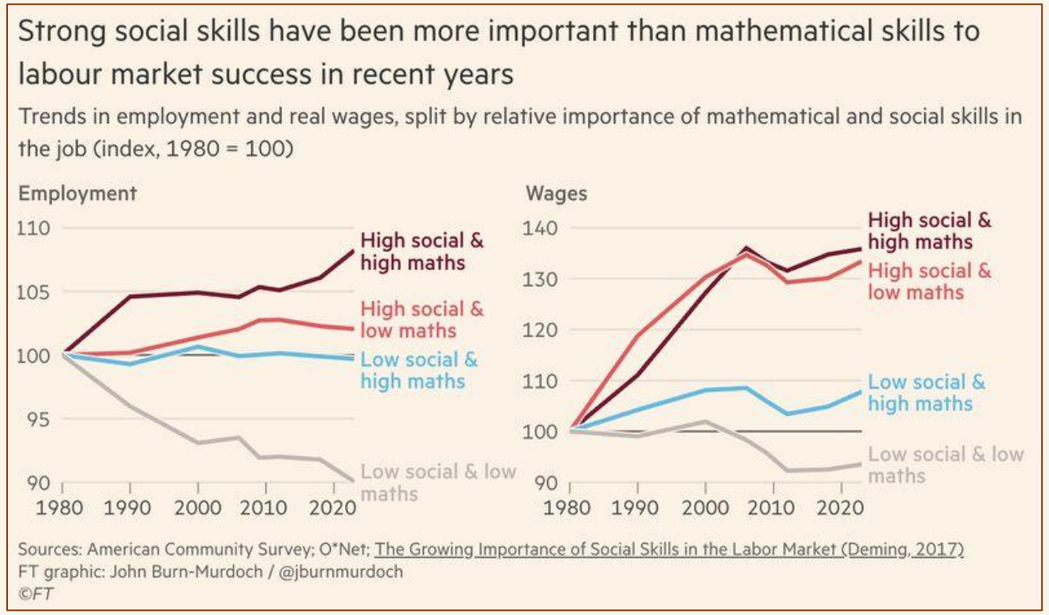
8x

Joy Multiplier

Presence of one peer increases laughter in young children (Addyman)

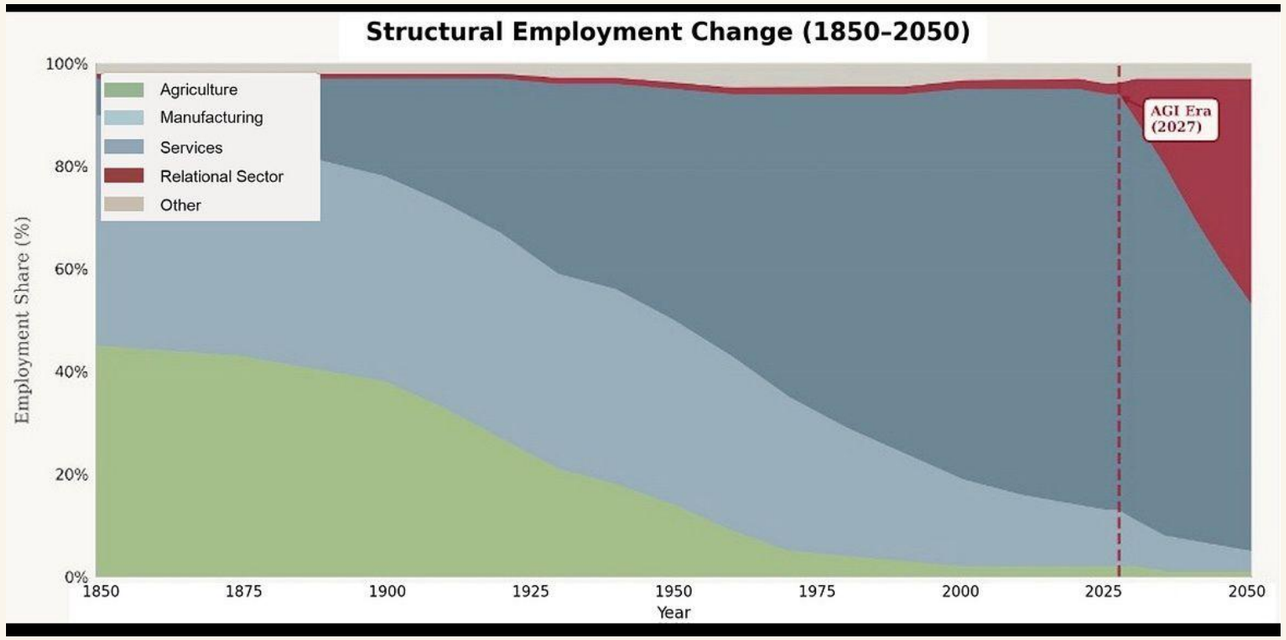
The Rise of Relational Economy

Rise of **Relational skills** for lifelong success



David Deming, Harvard University

Rise of **Relational Sector**

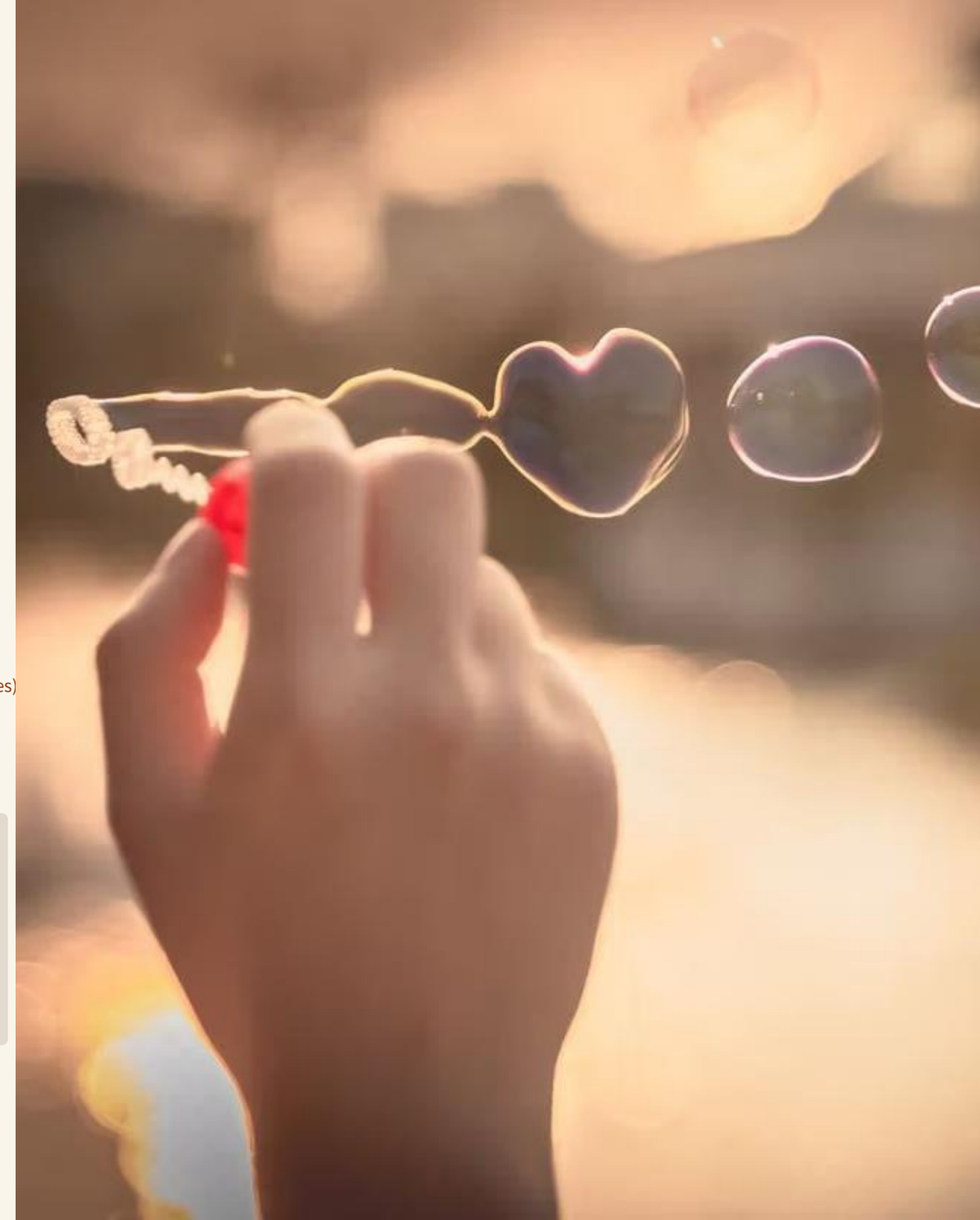


Alex Imas, University of Chicago
April 2026. https://aleximas.substack.com/p/what-will-be-scarce

The Science of Relationships

Relationships = Brain Development
Relationships = Learning
Relationships = Academic Success
Relationships = Wellbeing
Relationships = Resilience
Relationships = Peak Performance
Relationships = Lifelong Success (as measured by employment and wages)
Relationships = Health & Longevity

And yet, we have built learning systems that treat relationships as **invisible.** We measure content. We optimize efficiency. But we rarely **design for connection.**



The Relational Crisis

- **Fewer friends.** Teens with 3 and more friends from 59% in 2021 to 47% today
- **Fewer older friends.** Only 3% of children interact with adults above age 65 who are not family members
- **Fewer siblings.** Fertility decline
- **Fewer hours in** unstructured, face-to-face **play**
- **Declining social trust** across communities
- **Rising loneliness**, especially among the young
- **Rise in technology and screen time**: 40% of children under age 2 own their own device; adults pick up device 205x / day
- **Fragmented families and support systems**

The AI Era: A Turning Point

AI companionship on the rise (#1 AI use case HBR)
AI is highly sycophantic (Stanford)
Sycophantic AI makes human relationships less desirable (Stanford / Oxford)

> What happens to human relationships in a world where machines can mimic them?

AI Can Simulate

Empathy · Responsiveness · Availability

AI Cannot

Feel · Care · Truly know us

We risk confusing **interaction and connectivity** with **connection.**

A Choice in Front of Us

Path One

AI accelerates isolation.
Efficiency replaces connection.
Children interact more with machines than with humans.

Path Two

AI amplifies what makes us human.
It frees us to invest more deeply in relationships.
We invest in relational infrastructure.
Connection becomes the *center,* not the margin, of learning.

The Rise of Relational Intelligence (RQ)

IQ

Ability to reason

EQ

Ability to feel and empathize

RQ

Ability to connect, build trust, navigate difference, make meaning together.

It is learnable. It is measurable. It is foundational.

Why It Matters ***Now***

In an AI-powered world, many cognitive tasks will be augmented, or automated.

Relational intelligence will become more valuable, not less.

The future will not be defined by what we know alone, but by **how we relate.**

LOVE to LEARN

Toward a **Science of Relational Intelligence**

Define	**Measure**	**Globalize**	**Grow**	**Demonstrate Impact**
What is Relational Intelligence?	How do we measure RQ?	Is RQ universal?	Can RQ be strengthened?	Why does RQ matter?
Objective: Establish whether RQ is a distinct, scientifically meaningful construct.	**Objective:** Develop innovative ways of assessing relational capacities.	**Objective:** Build a globally valid framework.	**Objective:** Determine whether relational capacities are teachable.	**Objective:** Establish predictive validity.

Relational Infrastructure in the AI Age

Designing environments –- schools, workplaces, health systems, technology itself -- to make human connection the default, not the exception.

Childhood

Attachment-based coaching shows measurable gains in security and brain development.

Close teacher-student relationships predict higher achievement , even after controlling for IQ.

Education

Schools strong in 'relational trust' are 10x more likely to improve in reading and math.

Advisory systems and fewer, longer class links allow relationships to form and deepen.

Relationship-rich early learning environments show stronger social-emotional development.

Workplaces

Psychological safety is the #1 predictor of team effectiveness (Google's Project Aristotle).

Toxic culture is 10x more predictive of attrition than compensation.

Microsoft's relational culture reset enabled a 6x market-cap growth since 2014.

Healthcare

Patients of high-empathy physicians are 40% more likely to achieve good outcomes.

Relational training raised patient satisfaction 12% and reduced burnout 15%.

Doctors spend nearly half their day on documentation instead of human connection.

Aging

Chronic loneliness increases risk of early death by 25%.

Strong relationships predict better health and cognition decades into old age (Harvard Study).

Intergenerational programs show improvements in well-being and quality of life.

Technology

Technology that connects rather than isolates: design for presence, not just engagement.

Time saved by AI should become time reallocated to human connection.

Measure tech by the relationships it enables.

A Relational Renaissance

> A moment where the rise of artificial intelligence reminds us of **the irreplaceable value of human connection.**

A moment where we redefine intelligence, not just as what happens cognitively, but what happens **between people**.

Every technological revolution has changed
what humans can do.

Artificial intelligence may change what humans
no longer need to do.

But it also reminds us of what only humans can do.
We can love.
We can trust.
We can forgive.
We can build communities.
We can imagine futures together.

If we intentionally cultivate those capacities...
then the age of artificial intelligence may also become
the age of relational intelligence.

Thank you

Supplemental Materials | Research Questions

1. Conceptual Foundations: What is Relational Intelligence?

Objective: Establish whether RQ is a distinct, scientifically meaningful construct.

Research Questions

- What is Relational Intelligence (RQ), and how should it be conceptually defined?
- Which capacities are universal components of RQ (*e.g.,* trust, empathy, cooperation, perspective-taking, conflict resolution, belonging)?
- How does RQ differ from and overlap with adjacent constructs such as attachment, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, interpersonal competence, prosociality, compassion, and belonging?
- Is RQ best understood as a single construct or a multidimensional framework?
- How does RQ evolve across the lifespan?

Research Questions

2. Measurement: How do we measure RQ?

Objective: Develop innovative ways of assessing relational capacities.

Research Questions

- What are the strengths and limitations of existing measures of attachment, belonging, empathy, trust, social intelligence, relationship quality, and social connectedness?
- Can these measures be synthesized into an integrated RQ framework?
- Beyond self-report surveys, what novel methodologies can more authentically capture relational capacity?

Potential approaches include: Behavioral observations | Experience sampling (ecological momentary assessment)
Social network analysis | Peer and teacher ratings | Family and workplace assessments | AI-supported conversational analysis
Digital interaction patterns (used ethically and with consent) | Performance-based relational simulations
Wearable or physiological measures during collaboration

Research Questions

3. Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Is RQ Universal?

Objective: Build a globally valid framework.

Research Questions

- How is Relational Intelligence understood across cultures, languages, and traditions?
- Which relational capacities appear universal, and which are culturally specific?
- How do collectivist and individualist societies conceptualize successful relationships?
- What can Indigenous, African, Asian, Latin American, and other traditions contribute to our understanding of RQ?
- How should measures be adapted to ensure cultural validity?

This work could ultimately inform a Global Relational Intelligence Framework and, eventually, a Global Relational Intelligence Index.

Research Questions

4. Development and Intervention: Can RQ Be Strengthened?

Objective: Determine whether relational capacities are teachable.

Research Questions
Can Relational Intelligence be intentionally developed?
Which interventions most effectively strengthen RQ?
Which developmental periods are most sensitive for building relational capacities?
What role do families, schools, workplaces, and communities play?
Can AI be designed to strengthen—not replace—human relationships?
Are improvements in RQ sustained over time?

Potential interventions:
Parent coaching | Teacher professional development |Cooperative learning | Relationship-centered school cultures | **Relational Intelligence curriculum |** Workplace leadership training | AI-assisted relational coaching

Research Questions

5. Impact: Why Does RQ Matter?

Objective: Establish predictive validity.

Research Questions

- Does RQ predict educational outcomes beyond IQ and EQ?
- Does higher RQ improve mental health and resilience?
- Does RQ strengthen learning, creativity, and innovation?
- Does RQ predict workplace performance and leadership?
- Does RQ contribute to healthier families and communities?
- Does RQ increase civic engagement, trust, and democratic participation?
- What is the economic value of Relational Intelligence in an AI-driven economy?