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The Psychology of Interacting

The Logics of Human Interactions

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Note

This essay emerged from a dialogue with ChatGPT, developed using a method I have already employed for other essays: I proposed a title and a theme, ChatGPT suggested a table of contents, which I then modified to include aspects I considered relevant. Once the table of contents was agreed upon, I had ChatGPT write the chapters one at a time, correcting the terminology and content as I went along.

The specific theoretical framework of this essay—the sequence of relational situation, interpretation, motivation, psychological logic, strategy, transaction, and the notion of meta-interaction proposed here—was developed through this dialogue. However, it is part of a psychological and philosophical framework that I had developed independently long before engaging in dialogue with ChatGPT, as evidenced by a previous essay titled **Psychology of Needs**, which I wrote without external assistance. In particular, the concepts of need and desire, used in this essay as components of the motivational system, stem from that earlier work.

Claude.ai was used in this essay to revise the texts produced by ChatGPT through a detailed, chapter-by-chapter discussion in which changes were proposed, argued, and agreed upon together.

The responsibility for the arguments presented in this essay—and for any weaknesses they may contain—remains mine.

Bruno Cancellieri

"One cannot help but communicate."

Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson

(Pragmatics of Human Communication, 1967)

Foreword - Why a Psychology of Interacting

Every human being spends a considerable part of their life interacting with other human beings. From birth until death, our days are marked by an almost continuous succession of interactions: with family members, friends, colleagues, strangers, institutions, and groups.

Our psychological well-being depends, to a significant extent, on these interactions. What I mean is that much of our joy and sorrow depends on the quality of our social relationships, which in turn depend on the quality of the interactions that build them.

Yet, despite their importance, human interactions are rarely the subject of systematic observation by non-psychologists. We learn to speak, discuss, collaborate, compete, love, argue, and negotiate primarily through experience, imitation, and habit. We rarely stop to ask ourselves what underlying principles determine our own behavior and that of others.

When an interaction produces a satisfactory outcome, we tend to consider it normal. When, on the other hand, it leads to misunderstandings, conflicts, or suffering, we often attribute the cause to the participants' character, intentions, or good or bad will. More rarely do we ask ourselves whether those reactions were guided by implicit and unconscious psychological mechanisms.

The premise underlying this essay is not new: the idea that people do not react directly to situations as such, but rather to the interpretations they construct of them, is a well-established principle across multiple psychological traditions. It can be found, in various forms, in the sociology of W. I. Thomas, for whom the practical consequences of a situation depend on how it is defined by the individuals involved; in Aaron Beck's cognitive therapy, which has shown that emotional reactions depend on automatic interpretations of events rather than on the events themselves; in George Kelly's psychology of personal constructs, according to which each person interprets experience through their own system of categories that is constantly being revised; in theories of emotional appraisal (Lazarus, Scherer), which have documented how the same situation can generate different emotions depending on how it is evaluated by those experiencing it; and in the work of Paul Watzlawick and the Palo Alto School, for whom every communication conveys not only content but also a definition of the relationship between the communicators.

These traditions are not equivalent to one another, and the differences between a cognitive-clinical framework such as Beck's, a radical constructivist one such as Kelly's, and a systemic one such as Watzlawick's are far from marginal. This essay does not claim to reconcile them or to arbitrate between them. Its specific contribution lies not in the principle itself—which it inherits from this shared tradition—but in the attempt to articulate it in a sequence that can be analyzed step by step: how an interpretation is formed, how it encounters a motivational system, how it generates a goal, what psychological logic guides the choice of how to pursue it, what strategy results from it, and what concrete transactions translate it into observable behavior. It is in this articulation—and in the notion of meta-interaction that constitutes its practical outcome—that we must look for what this essay seeks to add, not in the initial thesis.

The main purpose of this essay is to provide the reader with a set of concepts and tools that will enable them to better understand their own way of interacting and that of others. Understanding does not mean justifying any behavior, nor does it mean foregoing moral judgment when it is appropriate. It means, before judging, trying to explain.

From this understanding can arise greater awareness of one's own reactions, a better ability to interpret those of others, and, in many cases, a freer choice of strategies for dealing with interactive situations.

A second objective of this essay is to propose a practice we will call **meta-interaction**: the process through which participants in an interaction seek to understand together how they interpreted the situation, what needs and rationales guided their strategies, and why they reacted the way they did.

This practice is not without precedent. The concept of *metacommunication* introduced by Gregory Bateson—communicating about communication itself—partially anticipates its spirit and forms the basis of the Palo Alto tradition mentioned earlier. Systemic-relational therapy, certain techniques of nonviolent communication, and some conflict mediation practices share the idea that two or more people can, together, reconstruct the meaning of what happened between them, moving beyond a mere judgment of who was right. What this essay seeks to add, therefore, is not the idea of shared reflection itself—which has a well-established history, particularly in therapeutic and specialized settings—but a more nuanced vocabulary—one that explicitly distinguishes between situation, interpretation, motivation, psychological logic, and strategy—designed to be usable even outside a clinical context, in the everyday life of informal relationships.

Meta-interaction, as we understand it here, requires a common language and a shared theory of interaction. This essay aims to contribute to the construction of both.

1 What Is Interacting?

The subject of this essay is not personality, nor communication, nor relationships considered in isolation. Its subject is interaction.

By “*interaction*,” we mean the process through which two or more individuals, through a succession of transactions, modify, maintain, or restore a relational situation.

By “*relational situation*,” we mean the configuration of roles, mutual expectations, power dynamics, constraints, and emotional climate that arises between two or more individuals at a given moment. A relational situation does not require a prior history between the participants: it already exists in the first encounter between strangers, where it is populated primarily by generic elements—roles and social classes, shared cultural norms, and expectations that each person brings with them regardless of who they are facing. As interactions accumulate, these generic elements are gradually supplemented and partly replaced by specific elements derived from the particular history that is being built between those two individuals.

In most cases, the relational situation is *intersubjective*: it involves at least two individuals who are actually present—even if not necessarily in the same physical space—each of whom produces interactions that the other interprets and to which the other responds with their own interactions. In some cases, however, an individual constructs and reacts to an *internalized* relational situation: the other—a deceased parent, a distant person with whom there is no contact, an imagined figure—does not produce real transactions, but is represented internally on the basis of memories, expectations, or imagination, and nonetheless guides the behavior of the person who internalizes them. This distinction is not trivial, and it is worth keeping it in mind right from this first chapter: the internalized situation shares with the intersubjective one the ability to guide interpretation, motivation, logic, and strategy—which we will discuss in subsequent chapters—but it cannot be subjected to the same direct verification, since the other, in this case, is not in a position to respond or be consulted. We will return to this difference in the chapter on meta-interaction, where it will have specific practical consequences.

A relational situation—whether intersubjective or internalized—is not immutable. Every transaction can confirm it, modify it, or help restore it to a previous state—a process of stabilization that, borrowing an image from systems theory, can be described as a form of relational homeostasis. Interaction consists precisely of this continuous succession of transactions and relational situations.

In this essay, a *transaction* is an observable behavior—whether intentional or not—that modifies, maintains, or attempts to restore a relational situation, provided that it is perceptible, at least potentially, to the other participant or participants. This condition is not redundant: it excludes from the category of transactions processes that are purely internal to an individual—a thought not translated into any external sign, an emotion held back without any perceptible manifestation—which may influence the interpretation of the situation by the person experiencing them, but do not constitute, as long as they remain devoid of any observable manifestation, a direct contribution to the interaction with the other. A transaction can be the initiation of a new interactive sequence or a response to a previous transaction. Speaking, listening, remaining silent, smiling, looking away, asking a question, offering help, explicitly ignoring someone, sending a message, or deciding not to respond are all examples of transactions.

We use the term “behavior,” rather than “action,” because we intend to include unintentional or unconscious behaviors as well. A facial expression that betrays discomfort, a hesitation, a change in tone of voice, or blushing can influence a relational situation just as much as a deliberately spoken phrase, provided—as mentioned—that they are perceptible to the other person. It should be clarified that, in defining interaction as a succession of transactions, we do not mean that every transaction is communicative in the ordinary sense of a deliberately transmitted message: an involuntary blush or a

hesitation does not communicate anything intentional, but they count as transactions in the broader sense adopted here—that is, any behavior perceptible to the other person becomes part of the interactive process, regardless of the intention of the person producing it.

We will call a transaction “*communicative*” if it satisfies at least one of the following conditions: that the sender produces it with an intention—even if minimal or not fully deliberate—to signal something to the other person—as in the case of a punch thrown on impulse, which communicates aggression even without calculation — or that the receiver attributes to it a meaning sufficiently salient to become part of their active interpretation of the relational situation, regardless of the sender’s intentions. Not every perceived transaction meets one of these two conditions: an involuntary blush, for example, is certainly perceived and may contribute, in the background, to the overall impression the other person forms of the situation, but in most cases it is not isolated as a signal in its own right, endowed with its own specific meaning to be deciphered—it remains, to use the language of the next chapter, an element not selected by the interpretation, rather than a specific object of it. A transaction, therefore, may not be communicative: every communication is a transaction, but not every transaction is communication.

The term “transaction” is already present in psychological literature, particularly in the work of Eric Berne. In this essay, it is used in a more general sense. While Berne employs it within the framework of his theory of ego states, here the term simply denotes the basic unit of interaction, regardless of the psychological model adopted to interpret it. We have chosen to retain this term, rather than coin a new one, because it seems sufficiently intuitive and is already part of the psychological tradition. We simply ask readers familiar with Transactional Analysis to bear in mind this different scope of the concept.

Interaction is a continuous process. Each transaction produces a relational situation that is slightly different from the previous one or helps to maintain it. To understand an interaction, it is therefore not enough to observe a single transaction. It is necessary to reconstruct the sequence of transactions and understand how each one contributed to changing, maintaining, or restoring the relational situation.

From this perspective, it is possible to distinguish four levels of analysis.

The *transaction* is the basic unit of interaction.

An *interaction* is a sequence of transactions that unfolds within a single relational situation or as part of its natural evolution. An interaction ends when the participants cease to influence one another or when the relational situation changes to the point of giving rise to a new interaction. In many cases, the boundary is clear; in others, it remains blurred. We will return to this issue in subsequent chapters.

A *relationship* is the relatively stable bond that unites two or more individuals, built, maintained, or transformed through a multitude of interactions over time. In this essay, the term is used in a broad sense and also includes weak or episodic relationships. Two neighbors who greet each other every morning, a shopkeeper and a regular customer, or two colleagues who collaborate occasionally are already, in this technical sense, in a relationship. The boundary between a relational situation lacking a specific history—such as that between two strangers, however laden with shared cultural expectations—and a true relationship is not sharp but gradual: there is generally no precise number of interactions beyond which a relational situation “becomes” a relationship. Rather, it is the repetition of interactions, accumulating over time, that gradually brings forth a bond that can be defined as a relationship in the proper sense, replacing the generic elements of the initial relational situation with specific elements that become increasingly substantial. For practical purposes, it makes sense to consider as “ ” those bonds in which the specific elements—derived from the particular history between those two individuals—have a recognizable influence on guiding subsequent interactions—while remaining aware that this is a matter of degree, not a clear-cut threshold.

The *social network* is the set of relationships in which an individual is embedded.

These four levels are closely connected, but they are not identical to one another, nor are they all of the same nature: the relational situation is what is active here and now, even in the absence of a shared history; the relationship is what develops over time between specific individuals; the social network is the sum of these developments. Understanding interaction means understanding how these levels influence one another. In the following chapters, the analysis will almost always focus on the levels of transaction and interaction, since it is at this scale that the sequence of situation–interpretation–motivation–logic–strategy is most clearly observed. The levels of relationship and social network will come explicitly into play in the chapter dedicated to meta-interaction, when the focus shifts to groups rather than individual pairs of participants.

Interaction takes on extremely diverse forms. It can be verbal or nonverbal, direct or indirect, cooperative or conflictual, intentional or spontaneous, conscious or unconscious. It can last a few seconds or unfold over many years.

Interaction is one of the primary processes through which human beings construct their social lives. Through these interactions, friendships, conflicts, families, organizations, collaborations, affiliations, and identities are formed, consolidated, modified, or dissolved.

Understanding interaction means understanding how individuals continually construct, maintain, and transform their relational situations, and how these, through repetition, solidify into relationships. It is this dynamic process—rather than individual behaviors considered in isolation—that constitutes the true subject of this essay.

One fundamental question remains, however. Why might two people participating in the same relational situation interpret it differently and, as a result, produce different transactions?

To answer this question, it is necessary to introduce the concept of the interpretation of the relational situation, to which the following chapter is devoted.

2 The Interpretation of the Relational Situation

In the previous chapter, we defined interaction as the process by which two or more individuals, through a succession of transactions, modify, maintain, or restore a relational situation.

At this point, a fundamental question arises: why do people involved in the same relational situation often produce different transactions?

The answer proposed in this essay is as follows:

Human beings do not react directly to the relational situation, but to the interpretation they construct of it.

This statement constitutes one of the fundamental principles of The Psychology of Interacting.

In the intersubjective case, the relational situation, as defined in the previous chapter, is relatively observable: the roles occupied, the norms in effect, and the events that have just occurred are, to a large extent, verifiable even by an external observer. However, no individual merely records these elements: each selects them, interprets them, and progressively constructs their own meaning of the situation. In the case of an internalized relational situation, however, this observability disappears entirely: the situation belongs entirely to the mental life of the person who constructs it, and no external observer—much less the actual person who may be represented—can directly ascertain its content. In this second case, interpretation does not select from shared elements but constitutes the situation itself almost entirely.

The interpretation of the relational situation is therefore the process through which each individual seeks to understand what is happening, what it means for them, and how they should respond.

This interpretation does not consist of a single judgment, but rather the integration of many assessments, often rapid and unconscious. Among the main ones are:

- what is happening;
- who the other participants are and what roles they are playing;
- what intentions they seem to have;
- what opportunities and risks the situation presents;
- what consequences might result from the various possible transactions;
- what rules, explicit or implicit, seem to be at play.

These assessments are not necessarily carried out consciously. In most everyday interactions, they occur extremely quickly and automatically, thanks to psychological processes developed through experience.

For this reason, two people involved in the same intersubjective relational situation may construct profoundly different interpretations of it.

Silence can be interpreted as respect, embarrassment, hostility, disinterest, or simply reflection.

Criticism can be experienced as help, aggression, a sign of trust, or humiliation.

A delay can be seen as a lack of respect, an unavoidable setback, or an event devoid of any particular significance.

In the intersubjective case, the relational situation is, for the most part, the same for the participants; what changes is the meaning each person attributes to it. It should be noted that this formulation presupposes the existence of multiple real participants who share, at least in part, the same observable situation: it does not apply to the internalized case, where there is no second real participant with whom the situation can be said to be shared.

Interpretation depends on numerous factors. Past experiences, knowledge, beliefs, culture, memory, emotions, personality traits, and one's current psychophysical state all contribute to determining how a situation is understood.

Furthermore, interpretation is not definitive. Each new transaction can confirm, modify, or refute the previous interpretation. Interaction is therefore a process in which both the relational situation and the interpretation that each participant constructs of it evolve simultaneously.

Understanding an interaction therefore means attempting to reconstruct not only the sequence of transactions but also the interpretations that guided the participants in producing them.

This reconstruction cannot provide absolute certainties. The interpretation of the relational situation belongs, in fact, to the individual's mental life and is not directly observable. We can only formulate more or less plausible hypotheses, comparing them with the available information and, when the participants are real and open to discussion, verifying them through dialogue with them. When, on the other hand, the situation is internalized, this direct verification is by definition impossible, since the other person is not in a position to respond: a limitation we will return to in the context of meta-interaction.

This observation leads directly to one of the main objectives of this essay. Understanding an interaction does not mean guessing what others are thinking, but rather constructing the most reasonable hypotheses about the interpretations that may have guided their interactions.

However, a further question remains. Even when two people interpret a situation in a very similar way—recognizing the same facts, the same roles, and the same probable intentions—they may still choose to react differently. Correctly interpreting what is happening, in fact, still says nothing about what an individual *hopes* to achieve from that situation, what *they fear*, or what *they consider* important or right.

To account for this difference, we must introduce a new element into the theory: motivations, which are the subject of the next chapter.

3 The Immediate Experience of Interacting

The previous chapters have introduced the relational situation and its interpretation as if they were contents that an observer—or the person themselves a moment later—can reconstruct and describe in words. This is a valid description, but it pertains to a different level than the one a person has access to while the interaction is taking place. In the heat of an interaction, one rarely has an interpretation already put into words: what one has access to, more often than not, is a still-formless sensation—positive or negative, often both at the same time.

This chapter does not retract what has been said so far, but operates on a different level of description. The interpretation described in the previous chapter remains a useful construct for explaining—often in hindsight—why a person reacted in a certain way. The immediate experience discussed here *includes* the interpretation itself in its form not yet articulated in words and explicit categories, but it is not limited to that: it may also incorporate the effect of signals that, as mentioned in the first chapter, remain below the threshold that would make them the object of active interpretation—a tone of voice not isolated as a signal in itself, a posture registered without being consciously noticed. These elements can contribute to the overall atmosphere of the sensation without ever undergoing, even implicitly, the selection process that the previous chapter attributed to interpretation. The immediate experience, therefore, cannot be reduced point by point to raw interpretation: it is a broader impression, of which the as-yet-unarticulated interpretation constitutes only a part—albeit often the most significant one.

The simplest form of this experience is the attraction-repulsion pair: a movement toward what appears favorable, a withdrawal from what appears threatening. It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that the two components are mutually exclusive, occurring one at a time depending on the situation. In the most meaningful interactions—those that matter most to the reader and most often leave a lasting impression—attraction and repulsion are typically present simultaneously. The same person, at the very same moment, can be perceived as both close and threatening; staying may feel both desirable and unbearable. This coexistence—rather than a simple alternation between one pole and the other—makes certain sensations difficult to recognize and name: not because they are ambiguous, but because they are truly dual in nature.

What follows typically concerns intersubjective situations, in which a real other is present or at least in a position to respond. An experience of the same nature—attraction, repulsion, blockage—can also arise in the internalized situations described in the first chapter, when the other is absent or imagined; but in that case, as we will see in connection with meta-interaction, the tension felt can never be put to the test in dialogue with a real interlocutor.

Let's imagine a person who, during a discussion with their partner, feels accused of having been distant in recent months. The moment they hear the accusation, they are unlikely to formulate an interpretation in their own words along the lines of: "My partner is trying to get more attention by questioning my commitment." What they feel, in all likelihood, is partly an interpretation that has not yet been translated into an explicit judgment, and partly the simple effect of cues—the tone of voice, a facial expression, the other person's posture—that will never become the subject of a distinct judgment: an impulse to draw closer, to reassure, to make amends, because that relationship is important to them and is under threat; and at the same time an impulse to withdraw, to defend oneself, to interrupt the exchange, because the accusation is experienced as unfair or as an attack on one's self-image. Neither impulse clearly prevails; both are present, and the person finds themselves, for a few moments, simply suspended between the two. Only later—a few minutes later, or during a meta-interaction—can the part of this tension that was already an interpretation be articulated in words and broken down into its constituent elements: the needs, values, and psychological logics involved. The part that was not yet an interpretation will remain, even in hindsight, an atmosphere that is difficult to translate entirely into an explicit judgment.

Recognizing this tension as it is being experienced is probably more within the reach of the average reader than reconstructing, in cold, detached terms, one's own interpretation of the situation or one's own motivational system—even if this is a plausible conjecture rather than an established fact. For this reason, the immediate experience, however raw, can serve as a practical starting point: it is not yet a clear articulation of what is happening, but it offers an initial element from which to proceed toward the more explicit reconstruction proposed in the following chapters and in the procedure described in Appendix B.

It must be said, however, that this foothold also carries a risk. An immediate feeling of attraction or repulsion, on its own, contains no indication of how one should act. Fear, for example, constitutes a particular form of repulsion: it signals that the situation is experienced as threatening and prompts the individual to protect themselves, to withdraw, or to avoid interaction. However, in the most significant relational situations, fear rarely acts alone. Very often, it coexists with an equally intense attraction: one wishes to maintain a relationship, but at the same time fears being hurt; one would like to speak, but fears being misunderstood; one wishes to resolve a conflict, but fears the conflict itself.

A particularly common form of fear concerns the possibility that the other person might discover aspects of our inner life that we would prefer to keep private. During an interaction, each person inevitably communicates much more than they explicitly state. Through their interactions, they reveal emotions, intentions, needs, desires, insecurities, values, beliefs, and even elements of their strategies. For this reason, many people devote a considerable portion of their cognitive resources not only to deciding what to do, but also to controlling what others might infer about them.

This concern can contribute to a block in the interaction. A person may refrain from speaking for fear of revealing a vulnerability, a desire, an interest, or an emotion that they consider dangerous. They may interrupt a line of reasoning because they fear the other person will intuit their conclusions. They may limit themselves to cautious, vague, or ambiguous transactions in an attempt to minimize the information they offer to the other person. In these cases, inhibition stems not only from fear of the consequences of one's actions, but also from the fear that the other person will gain insight into one's mind that is considered excessive or unwanted.

From this perspective, every interaction is also a continuous negotiation of mutual transparency. Each participant seeks, to varying degrees, both to understand the other's mental states and to decide how much of their own to reveal. Even silences, hesitations, changes of subject, or deliberately vague responses can be interpreted as attempts to influence not so much the other person's behavior as the mental image they are forming of us.

In many situations, the problem lies not so much in choosing between attraction and repulsion, but in the fact that neither manages to prevail with sufficient force to guide action. The individual may then experience a state of decision-making block or paralysis. From the outside, this state may appear as passivity, hesitation, or silence. In reality, the interaction does not stop: the relational situation continues to evolve, the other person continues to interpret behavior and produce new transactions, while the individual remains temporarily unable to decide which direction to take the interaction. Even not intervening therefore constitutes a transaction, but one in which the inhibition of action itself becomes part of the interactive process.

In impulsive reactions, the part of the immediate experience that was already an interpretation—even if not yet articulated—is immediately translated into a transaction, without allowing time for a more explicit articulation: motivation, logic, and strategy also remain implicit in the act itself, rather than becoming progressively distinguishable. Conversely, when the conflict between attraction and repulsion produces a temporary suspension of action, the subject has, at least in principle, a space in which broader reflection, a more explicit articulation of the interpretive aspect of their experience, and the search for alternative strategies can take place. Immediate experience thus represents a valuable starting point for understanding the interaction, but it should not be confused with understanding

itself—not least because, as noted, part of it will never be fully translatable into an explicit interpretation.

The question remains: what determines, in the face of the same tension between attraction and repulsion, the formation of the goals that will guide subsequent behavior? The following chapter is devoted to this question, in which we will introduce the concept of a motivational system.

4 Motivations

In the previous chapter, we saw that human beings do not react directly to the relational situation, but to the interpretation they construct of it. Interpretation, however, is not enough to explain behavior. Two people may interpret a situation in very similar ways and yet produce completely different transactions.

Let's imagine that a manager informs two employees that the company is facing a reorganization. Both understand the situation: they know there will be changes, that some roles may be altered, and that the future is uncertain. Yet one reacts by volunteering for new responsibilities, while the other immediately begins looking for a new job. The difference does not depend on their interpretation of the situation, but on what each person wishes to achieve, avoid, or preserve.

To understand human behavior, it is therefore necessary to introduce a new concept: that of motivation. In this essay, we will define motivation as any internal condition that directs an individual toward certain situations while avoiding others—whether by seeking them out, maintaining them, modifying them, or preventing their change. Motivations form the link between the interpretation of a relational situation and the decisions the individual will subsequently make. The same situation can have similar meanings for different people and yet lead to different behaviors precisely because their motivations differ.

Motivations can have different origins. Some stem from fundamental biological needs, such as survival, safety, or rest. Others develop over the course of a person's life through education, culture, and personal experiences. Still others originate in values, moral convictions, ideals, or life plans. Although they differ from one another, they all contribute to guiding behavior.

In this essay, we will distinguish three fundamental components of the motivational system—needs, desires, and values—which we consider determinative for the purposes of the proposed theory. To these we add a fourth element, the goal, which is not an ingredient on the same level as the first three, but rather their product in a specific relational situation.

Needs are conditions whose satisfaction is perceived as necessary for an individual's physical or psychological well-being. Desires, on the other hand, concern states, objects, or experiences considered pleasant or preferable, even if they are not indispensable. Values are the criteria through which a person evaluates what they consider to be right, important, desirable, or worth pursuing.

It should be noted that, for the purposes of the analytical sequence proposed in this essay, needs, desires, and values are treated as three distinct components placed on the same level, without one being derived from the others. This choice is for the sake of clarity; it is not the only possible one: the author believes, from a broader perspective that goes beyond the scope of this essay, that needs constitute the foundation from which desires and values ultimately derive their origin and strength—a thesis developed elsewhere and neither demonstrated nor required here. Readers interested in this deeper hierarchy will not find it discussed in these pages, where the three components function, by methodological choice, as independent and coordinated determinants.

It is also worth noting a second theoretical choice in this essay, which the attentive reader will have already noticed: emotions do not appear here as a fourth, autonomous component of the motivational system, alongside needs, desires, and values. This does not mean that they are treated as psychologically less relevant. Fear, discussed in the previous chapter in relation to immediate experience, clearly directs behavior toward avoidance—and in this sense produces an effect identical to that of a motivation. In this essay, however, we treat it not as an autonomous motivation—but as the affective signal that a need, desire, or value already present in the individual's motivational system is perceived as threatened: fear does not introduce a new type of determinant, but makes it perceptible,

in the form of an immediate experience, that something already motivationally relevant is at stake. A model that aims to fully account for the logic of interaction would likely need to explore this relationship between emotion and motivation with greater precision than this essay provides; the choice to simplify is explicitly stated here, pending a theoretical development that can bridge this gap.

Goals are the specific outcomes that an individual decides to pursue in a given relational situation. They are not a fourth determinant alongside the other three, but rather the outcome—provisional and context-dependent—of their combination. The same combination of needs, desires, and values can generate different goals in different relational situations. Conversely, the same relational situation can give rise to different goals in individuals with different motivational systems.

More precisely, a goal takes shape when an individual's motivational system is confronted with a specific interpretation of the relational situation. It should be noted, however, that this relationship is not necessarily one-way: while interpretation typically precedes and fuels the formation of the goal, it is equally true—and supported by the literature on so-called *motivated reasoning* (Kunda, 1990)—that an already active motivation can influence interpretation, leading the individual to interpret an ambiguous situation in the way that best serves to satisfy what they desire or fear. In this essay, we will treat interpretation and motivation as distinct and analytically separable moments, but the reader should not imagine a rigidly unidirectional sequence between them—nor, more generally, should the reader imagine that the levels discussed in this essay (situation, interpretation, motivation, and the subsequent logic and strategy) form a one-way chain. They remain, in all likelihood, mutually interrelated systems, one aspect of which we isolate here for expository purposes.

It is fair to note, however, that this clarification mitigates the problem more than it resolves it. If, as noted in the previous chapter, the interpretation of a situation already includes an assessment of the opportunities and risks it presents, then interpreting already requires a criterion for distinguishing an opportunity from a threat—and such a criterion is, to all intents and purposes, motivational content. In this sense, interpretation and motivation may not be two sequential stages—however mutually connected they may be—but rather two aspects of a single act of evaluation, distinguishable on an analytical level but inseparable on a genealogical one. This essay maintains the distinction for expository purposes, but does not claim to have untangled this knot, and alerts the reader that this is a limitation of the model, not a difficulty that has already been overcome.

An example can clarify how the same motivation, when applied to different interpretations, leads to different goals. A person with a strong need for security, upon learning of the same corporate reorganization as in our initial example, may set the goal of keeping their job if they interpret the announcement as a threat; conversely, they may set the goal of obtaining written guarantees regarding their future role if they interpret the same situation as an opportunity for negotiation. The need for security is the same in both cases; what changes, depending on the interpretation, is what the person actually decides they want to achieve.

These components do not operate in isolation. Needs, desires, and values can conflict with one another, and these motivational conflicts carry over into the resulting goals. A person may sincerely wish to speak their mind and, at the same time, need to maintain a good relationship with the person they are speaking to. They may place great value on honesty and, at the same time, fear the consequences of a confession. Much of the complexity of human behavior stems precisely from these conflicts and the ambiguous or contradictory goals that result from them.

Motivations are not always conscious. Sometimes a person knows clearly what they want to achieve; other times they feel only a sense of unease, an attraction, a repulsion, or an impulse, without being able to identify its source. Even in these cases, however, motivations continue to profoundly influence behavior.

Motivations, however, do not directly determine interactions. An additional element intervenes between motivations and behavior. Two people may share the same needs, the same desires, and even the same goals, yet choose completely different strategies to achieve them. To explain this difference, it is necessary to introduce the concept of psychological logic.

In the sense we will attribute to this term, a psychological logic is a set of rules—more or less conscious—through which an individual determines how to act in order to achieve their goals in various relational situations. Psychological logics thus serve as the bridge between motivations and strategies for action and represent one of the central elements of the theory proposed in this essay. The next chapter will be devoted to them.

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5 Psychological Logics

In the previous chapter, we saw that the interpretation of a relational situation, when combined with the individual's motivational system, leads to the formation of one or more goals.

However, even this is not yet sufficient to explain behavior.

Two people may share the same interpretation of the situation, have very similar motivations, and pursue the same goal, yet be guided by opposing criteria regarding how they should act.

Let's imagine two candidates vying for the same job. Both interpret the situation as a competition; both want to be hired and place great value on professional success. Yet one is convinced that, to prevail, it is best to highlight one's own skills without ever mentioning the other candidates; the other is convinced that it is best to discredit the competitors. The goal is identical; what differs is the criterion each person uses to determine what is the right course of action to achieve it.

To explain this difference, we introduce the concept of *psychological logic*.

In this essay, we will refer to *psychological logic* as a relatively stable set of rules—more or less conscious—through which an individual determines how to act in order to achieve certain goals in various relational situations.

Psychological logics do not determine what we wish to achieve. That is the task of the motivational system and the goals that derive from it. Instead, they determine how, according to the individual, one should go about trying to achieve it.

Every psychological logic incorporates, either explicitly or implicitly, “if... then...” relationships, in the same way they are encoded in computer software: “If I find myself in a situation of this kind and wish to achieve this result, then it is best to behave in this way.” This conditional structure remains, in our view, essential for describing the functioning of a psychological logic. However, an important difference from traditional software should be noted: while the rules of a program remain fixed until someone rewrites them from the outside, psychological logics change from within, as a result of the very experience they help to guide—they strengthen, weaken, and refine themselves, often without the individual deliberately intervening in them, as we will see shortly. The conditional structure is therefore a feature that psychological logics share with computer science; their plasticity over time, as we describe it here, is not.

These relationships do not necessarily have to be formulated in words. In most cases, they operate automatically, without the individual being fully aware of them.

It is worth distinguishing psychological logic right away from an element already introduced in Chapter 2: the evaluation—characteristic of interpretation—of what consequences might result from the various possible transactions. The two are closely related, and the distinction between them warrants more caution than has been exercised so far in this essay. Interpretation, as noted, estimates what would happen if one acted in one way or another: it is, in principle, a prediction. Psychological logic determines which of the possible behaviors is the appropriate one according to one's own criteria: it is a criterion for choice. But, for the same reason already discussed regarding interpretation and motivation in Chapter 4, this distinction warrants caution: interpretation, when assessing risks and opportunities, already requires a normative criterion not too dissimilar from the one we attribute here to psychological logic. We maintain the distinction because it remains useful for analytical purposes, without claiming that it is a clear-cut separation.

Psychological logics are formed through experience. Some seem to have evolutionary or biological bases; others are learned by observing the behavior of others; still others derive from education, culture, or personal experiences. Many are progressively modified over the course of a lifetime, while others tend to consolidate and become relatively stable.

A single person typically possesses many psychological logics. They are not all activated simultaneously. Their activation depends on the interpretation of the relational situation, on the goals that are active at that moment, and on the individual's prior experience.

It should be noted—as already observed regarding the relationship between interpretation and motivation—that here too, the influence is not one-way. Not only does the goal activate the logic best suited to achieving it, but over time, the logics an individual possesses can also narrow the goals they are willing to set. A person who does not possess—or does not recognize as legitimate—any non-aggressive logic for gaining respect might, over time, stop setting goals that would require an approach other than an aggressive one—not because they no longer desire them in the abstract, but because they lack the tools to conceive of them as attainable.

Psychological logics are not necessarily correct. They may be effective or ineffective, realistic or based on mistaken beliefs, adaptive or dysfunctional. One person may be convinced that aggression is the best way to gain respect, while another may believe that cooperation yields better results. Both are applying a psychological logic; this does not mean that both accurately describe how human relationships work.

Psychological logics are not immutable either. They can be confirmed, weakened, or modified by experience. Every interaction provides new information that can reinforce or challenge the rules an individual uses to guide their behavior.

At this point, it is appropriate to distinguish psychological logics from strategies—but it is worth doing so with the same caution just applied to interpretation and logic, because this distinction is also less clear-cut than its explanatory utility might suggest.

A psychological logic does not yet specify which concrete behavior will be adopted. It defines a general criterion for action. A strategy, on the other hand, consists of the concrete plan through which, in a given relational situation, the individual seeks to apply that logic to achieve their goals. In the example of the two candidates just discussed, for instance, it is by no means a given that the two contenders actually share the same logic applied to different strategies, rather than having, from the outset, two slightly different logics—one guided by a criterion such as “prevailing by demonstrating one's own value,” the other by a criterion closer to “prevailing by undermining the value of others.” Distinguishing whether this is a single logic applied differently or two distinct logics is not always possible with the certainty with which this essay, for the sake of clarity, treats the two cases as clearly separable.

A single logic can give rise to different strategies, just as a single strategy can be adopted based on different logics. Understanding behavior therefore requires distinguishing between these two levels where the distinction is observable, while acknowledging that it is not always equally clear.

Psychological logics represent the link between goals and strategies. They constitute the level at which the individual translates their goals into general criteria for action. Strategies then translate these criteria into concrete decisions, from which observable transactions arise.

In the next chapter, we will examine this very process more closely: the way in which psychological logics are transformed into strategies and, subsequently, into transactions—keeping in mind, there as well, that the boundary between the two levels must be treated with the same caution already exercised here.

6 Strategies and Transactions

In the previous chapter, we introduced the concept of psychological logic, defining it as the set of criteria by which an individual determines how to act in order to achieve certain goals—while noting that the boundary between this level and that of interpretation is less clear-cut than its explanatory utility might suggest.

However, even the level of psychological logic does not yet coincide with observable behavior.

Two people may share the same psychological logic and pursue the same goal, yet adopt different strategies.

Let's imagine two teachers who are convinced that, to earn their students' respect, it is important to maintain authority. One decides to build authority through competence, consistency, and dialogue; the other through strict discipline and frequent use of punishments. We describe this case as "same logic, different strategies" for the sake of clarity, with the same caution already noted in Chapter 4 regarding interpretation and motivation: it cannot be proven that the two teachers truly share a single criterion, rather than being guided from the outset by two distinct logics.

In this essay, we will refer to a "*strategy*" as the plan of action through which an individual seeks to apply one or more psychological logics to achieve a specific goal in a particular relational situation.

A strategy is therefore much more concrete than a logic. While a logic expresses a general criterion for choice, a strategy adapts it to the characteristics of the situation the individual believes they are facing.

The same logic can give rise to different strategies. Conversely, seemingly similar strategies may be adopted on the basis of different logics—although it must be noted, with the same caution already applied to the example of the two teachers, that behaviors that are only *apparently* identical are often not entirely so: a smile used to reassure an interlocutor and a smile used to mask hostility may seem similar at first glance, but they tend to differ in subtle observable traits—such as whether the muscles around the eyes are engaged, symmetry, and consistency with the rest of the facial expression—which an attentive interlocutor, even without being able to articulate it, often picks up on. Observable behavior may therefore appear the same at a superficial glance, even though it is not entirely so upon closer examination: the distinction between logic and strategy should not lead one to believe that the interactions expressing them are, on an observable level, perfectly interchangeable.

Strategies are not necessarily formulated consciously. In some situations, they are carefully planned; in others, they emerge almost automatically from experience accumulated over the course of a lifetime. Even when they are not explicitly formulated, they nevertheless continue to serve the function of organizing transactions toward a goal.

A strategy is not the same as a single transaction. In most cases, it involves a coordinated sequence of transactions spread out over time. Persuading someone, regaining a friend's trust, securing a promotion, or closing a deal typically requires many transactions, each of which takes on meaning in relation to the others.

Furthermore, strategies are not rigid. During an interaction, individuals continually observe the effects of their own transactions and may decide to confirm the initial strategy, modify it, or replace it with a different one. In fact, each new transaction provides information that helps redefine the relational situation, the interpretation constructed of it, the goals, and, consequently, the strategy itself.

Here, too, the process is not unidirectional. While strategies typically derive from psychological logics, strategies that are habitually adopted and have proven effective can, over time, reinforce or alter the

logics that generated them. Strategies thus constitute not only an application of these logics but also one of the mechanisms through which they evolve.

Strategies may be more or less effective in relation to the pursued objectives. They may also produce unexpected effects—both positive and negative—because the other participants in the interaction continually interpret transactions according to their own motivations and psychological logics. No strategy, therefore, guarantees the desired outcome.

Strategies manifest themselves through concrete behaviors. These behaviors are *transactions*—that is, the basic units of interaction introduced in the first chapter.

Every transaction represents the concrete implementation of a strategy, even when that strategy is only partially conscious or is modified during the course of the interaction. Understanding a transaction therefore means attempting to reconstruct the strategy of which it is a part and, going further back, the psychological logic, goals, motivations, and interpretation of the relational situation that made it possible—keeping in mind, at every step of this reconstruction, that the boundaries between these levels are useful analytical tools rather than clearly observable divisions in the individual's psychological reality.

At this point, we have all the necessary elements to analyze the complete process through which individuals construct their interactions. In the following chapters, we will examine how these elements influence one another in the course of relational dynamics and how they can be used to better understand our own behavior and that of others.

7 The Cycle of Interacting

The previous chapters have introduced the main elements of the theory proposed in this essay: the relational situation, its interpretation, the motivational system, goals, psychological logics, strategies, and transactions.

These elements do not constitute a simple linear sequence. They form a circular process that repeats continuously during every interaction.

A transaction modifies, maintains, or restores a relational situation. The new situation is interpreted by the participants, activates motivations and goals, invokes certain psychological logics, guides new strategies, and produces new transactions. These, in turn, modify the relational situation once again, initiating a new cycle.

Interaction can therefore be described as a continuous succession of cycles in which each phase influences the subsequent ones and, indirectly, the preceding ones as well.

For the sake of clarity, we have analyzed the various elements of the model separately. In reality, they almost always operate simultaneously and influence one another.

Interpretation influences goals, but goals can also guide interpretation.

Psychological rationales guide the choice of strategies, but strategies tested over time can alter those rationales.

Transactions alter the relational situation, but the new situation immediately alters the way in which subsequent transactions will be interpreted. It must be noted, however, that this connection should not always be imagined as an ordered sequence of distinct phases: especially in its nonverbal aspects—eye contact, facial expressions, posture—interaction often proceeds as a nearly continuous and mutually intertwined flow, rather than as a clear alternation of initiatives and responses. Only by observing the interaction in great detail, or by considering it in its broader context, is it possible to identify a distinguishable sequence between one transaction and the next.

We are therefore not dealing with a rigidly ordered chain of causes and effects, but rather with a dynamic system characterized by continuous feedback loops.

Some of these links—such as the one just described between a transaction and a relational situation—remain feedback loops between genuinely distinct elements. Others, as we saw in the context of interpretation, motivation, logic, and strategy (Chapter 4), may never have been distinct to begin with.

This observation has an important implication.

Understanding an isolated transaction is often insufficient. Its meaning depends on the position it occupies in the interaction cycle.

A question can be a request for information, a provocation, an expression of interest, an attempt at control, or a gesture of courtesy. The observable behavior is identical; its meaning depends on the point in the process at which it occurs and on the relational situation it helps to shape.

For this reason, *The Psychology of Interacting* never considers a transaction to be a self-contained event. Every transaction is interpreted as a moment within a broader process.

The same applies to people.

No individual possesses a single psychological logic, a single strategy, or a single goal. During the course of a single interaction, they may change multiple times, following the evolution of the relational situation.

An interaction is therefore a process of mutual adaptation.

Each participant continuously observes the effects of their own transactions and those of others, updates their interpretation of the situation, redefines their goals, modifies their strategies, and generates new transactions.

Of course, this adaptation is not always a conscious process. In most cases, it occurs automatically, through psychological processes learned through experience.

This ability to adapt explains why human interactions are often unpredictable.

Even when participants have relatively stable motivations, a simple change in the relational situation can alter their goals, trigger different lines of reasoning, and give rise to new strategies.

The model proposed in this essay therefore does not claim to predict human behavior with certainty. Its goal is more limited: to provide a conceptual framework that helps us understand how transactions take shape and why, in the course of an interaction, they can evolve in very different ways.

This way of observing interaction also suggests a different way of analyzing human behavior. Rather than simply asking, “Why did that person do that?”, it is better to ask:

- What was the relational situation?
- How might they have interpreted it?
- What motivations might have been at play?
- What goal might they have formed?
- What psychological logic might have guided them?
- What strategy was she likely following?

These questions do not guarantee a definitive answer. However, they provide a method for formulating increasingly plausible hypotheses about how the interaction works.

In the following chapters, we will use this model to understand more complex phenomena, such as cooperation, conflict, misunderstandings, and, finally, meta-interaction.

8 Triad Configurations

The previous chapters have described interaction as a process that typically involves two individuals: a relational situation that binds them, an interpretation that each constructs of it, a motivational system that guides their goals, psychological logics, and strategies that translate into observable transactions.

This description, however useful, leaves out an element that is often just as significant as the direct relationship between the two participants: the presence, in the background of their interaction, of a third party toward whom both harbor an attitude—positive or negative—that influences how they behave toward one another.

Let's imagine two colleagues, Anna and Marco, discussing a work project. Their relational situation, as we've described it so far, includes their roles, their mutual expectations, and the atmosphere of the discussion. But if both have very different attitudes toward a third colleague, Paolo—Anna respects him, while Marco considers him incompetent—this shared or divergent attitude becomes part of the relational situation between Anna and Marco, even though Paolo is not present and is not participating in the conversation. Any reference, even indirect, to a project Paolo is working on risks triggering a tension that nothing in the direct relationship between Anna and Marco alone would suggest.

To account for these cases, we introduce the concept of a triadic configuration, which draws upon and extends, within a different theoretical framework, the theory of cognitive equilibrium formulated by Fritz Heider. Heider observed that when two individuals (P and O) hold an attitude toward the same third element (X, which in his formulation could be a person but also an object or an idea), their relationship tends toward a state of equilibrium when the signs of the attitudes involved—positive or negative—combine in a coherent manner: if Anna and Marco both hold Paolo in high regard, the configuration is balanced; if one holds him in high regard and the other despises him, the configuration is unbalanced, and generates a tension that the participants tend, in one way or another, to resolve.

This calculation, with its clear assignment of positive or negative signs, should be treated as a simplified case—useful for illustrating the mechanism, as in the example just given—rather than as the typical condition of real triadic configurations. In most cases, the attitude toward the third element is neither purely positive nor purely negative, but ambivalent: the same individual may harbor both esteem and impatience toward Paolo, without one consistently prevailing over the other. In these cases—which are more common than the clear-cut example just discussed—“balance” and “imbalance” are not the result of a multiplication of signs, but rather a degree of tension that depends on the extent to which the ambivalences of the two participants overlap or clash with one another.

Within the framework of this essay, a triadic configuration does not require that the third element be a physically present person, nor does it necessarily have to be a person at all. It may be an absent person, an institution, a shared or contested value, or a cultural symbol. What makes an element part of a triadic configuration is not its nature, but its relevance: X becomes part of the relational situation between P and O only when the attitudes of both toward it are sufficiently salient and stable to recognizably influence their mutual interactions. A casual, inconsequential opinion on any given topic does not constitute a triadic configuration in this technical sense; it becomes one when the participants themselves, implicitly or explicitly, treat that attitude as relevant to their relationship. Without this constraint, almost every pair of individuals would share an indefinite number of attitudes toward an indefinite number of objects, and the concept of a triadic configuration would lose any ability to isolate anything specific.

It should also be noted that the third element of a triadic configuration can itself be an internalized relational situation in the sense described in the first chapter. An adult child and his or her partner may hold different attitudes toward a parent who has since passed away, and this difference—even though it does not involve any person who is actually present or capable of responding—can generate the

same tension that a living, present third party would generate. In such cases, the triadic configuration inherits, along with the internalized third element, the limitation already noted: since the third element is unable to produce its own transactions or be consulted, the configuration cannot be subjected to the same direct verification that we will discuss in relation to meta-interaction.

Triadic configurations can be more or less balanced, but it is important not to confuse this notion of balance with a value judgment. An unbalanced configuration—or one marked by strong ambivalence—is not necessarily dysfunctional, nor is a balanced configuration necessarily healthy: two people who share a clear contempt for a third person may be in a balanced configuration that reinforces an exclusionary group dynamic harmful to that third person. Balance—or tension, in the most common cases where the attitudes involved are ambivalent—describes a psychological tendency, not a desirable condition in and of itself.

When a configuration is unbalanced, or marked by tension due to the ambivalence of the attitudes involved, the participants tend to reduce that tension in one of several typical ways: by modifying their own attitude toward the third element—an attitude that, in the terms of this essay, can be traced back to a value, a desire, or a residue of immediate experience not yet fully articulated—to align it with that of the other; by downplaying the importance of the third element, so as to render it irrelevant to the relationship; accepting the divergence and treating it as a secondary aspect of the relationship, one that does not necessarily require resolution; or, and this is perhaps the most significant path for a direct relationship such as that between Anna and Marco, allowing the disagreement over the third element to undermine the relationship itself between the two participants—a cooling of relations, a decline in mutual trust, or even a breakup, which “resolves” the tension not by changing attitudes toward Paolo, but by altering the bond between Anna and Marco upon which the triadic configuration was based. Which of these paths is taken depends—as with every other aspect of interaction discussed in this essay—on the interpretation of the situation, the motivational system, and the psychological logic of the participants—not on an automatic law of rebalancing.

Triadic configurations do not replace the dyadic analysis proposed in the previous chapters, but rather complement it. Understanding an interaction between two people often requires asking not only how each interprets the situation, the other person, and themselves, but also which third-party elements—people, values, symbols—enter, explicitly or implicitly, into their relationship, and with what degree of convergence, divergence, or ambivalence in attitude.

In the chapter on meta-interaction, we will return to this topic, because triadic configurations pose a specific challenge to any attempt at shared reflection: when the third element is a real person open to dialogue, meta-interaction can, in principle, include that person; when it is an absent person, an institution, or a value, it can only be discussed by the two direct participants, without the object of their disagreement ever being consulted directly.

9 Why do we understand interacting so poorly?

The previous chapters have distinguished the relational situation from its interpretation, motivations from goals, psychological logics from strategies, and strategies from transactions. At this point, a question naturally arises: if understanding interactions is so important, why do human beings pay so little attention to them?

The answer is not simple. The reasons are numerous and often reinforce one another.

One reason is that psychological rationales operate largely implicitly. We are usually aware of our transactions and, at least in part, of our goals. We are far less aware of the rationales through which we decide what is appropriate to do. These rationales are learned gradually over the course of a lifetime, and precisely because they become habitual, they end up being perceived as natural or obvious.

A second reason is that we directly observe only a small part of the process described in the previous chapters. Transactions are public; the interpretation of the situation, motivations, goals, rationales, and strategies, on the other hand, belong to the individual's inner life. Consequently, we are constantly tempted to explain others' behavior based almost exclusively on what we see, forgetting that observable behavior represents only the final stage of a much more complex process.

A third reason lies in the speed with which interactions unfold. In everyday life, people must decide in a matter of moments how to react. They rarely have the time or interest to reconstruct the entire process that led a particular person to behave in a certain way. It therefore becomes natural to resort to simple explanations, even when they are incomplete.

There is also a social reason. Gaining a deep understanding of an interaction often requires questioning one's own interpretation of the situation, one's own motivations, and one's own psychological reasoning. This process can be uncomfortable, because it forces us to acknowledge that our own behavior is not always the most reasonable or the most effective. It is psychologically easier to attribute relational difficulties to the character, intelligence, or good or bad will of others.

Everyday language also contributes to this difficulty, and probably not by chance: in daily life, we have numerous words to describe emotions or behaviors, but far fewer to describe the processes through which a behavior takes shape. It is relatively easy to say that a person was aggressive, shy, or arrogant; it is much harder to accurately describe the interpretation of the situation, the motivations, the reasoning, and the strategies that may have produced that behavior.

Another difficulty stems from the fact that each individual is a protagonist in their own interaction. We are not outside observers, but actively involved participants. Our emotions, interests, and goals inevitably influence how we interpret what is happening. Understanding an interaction therefore requires an effort of observation that goes against the spontaneous tendency to defend one's own point of view.

Finally, there is a cultural reason. Many social skills are considered abilities that are acquired spontaneously through experience. It is taken for granted that simply living among others is enough to learn how to interact effectively. In reality, experience leads to learning only when accompanied by reflection. Without a systematic effort to observe and review one's own psychological reasoning, experience can simply reinforce ineffective habits.

In addition to all these practical reasons, there is a more fundamental, theoretical one: as noted in Chapter 4, even an explicit model struggles to draw clear boundaries between its own levels. It is therefore not surprising that spontaneous understanding in everyday life encounters the same difficulties in an even more acute form.

The result is that most people spend their lives engaging in thousands of interactions without developing an explicit model of how they work. They learn how to behave, but rarely learn to understand why that behavior worked—or didn't work.

The Psychology of Interacting arises precisely from the attempt to bridge this gap. Its goal is not to replace experience, but to make it more instructive. Every interaction can become an opportunity to formulate hypotheses, test one's psychological reasoning, and progressively improve one's understanding of human behavior.

This shift in perspective, however, requires a method. Understanding an interaction does not mean freely imagining what others think or feel, but rather systematically reconstructing the elements of the process we have described in the previous chapters. The following chapter will be devoted to the method of understanding interactions.

10 Understanding Interacting

The question now is how to apply, in practice, the theoretical model developed in the previous chapters. As we have seen, a transaction does not arise suddenly: it is the result of a process involving the relational situation, its interpretation, the motivational system, goals, psychological logics, and strategies.

Understanding an interaction therefore means attempting to reconstruct this process as much as possible.

It is important to emphasize that understanding does not mean guessing what others are thinking or feeling. It means formulating reasoned hypotheses that are consistent with observed behaviors and available information, knowing that these hypotheses may be confirmed, corrected, or refuted by new observations or, when possible, by direct discussion with the people involved.

The Psychology of Interacting thus offers a method of analysis rather than a technique for prediction.

When the analyst has directly participated in the interaction, a good starting point is their own immediate experience, discussed in Chapter 3: the still-unformed, often ambivalent sensation that precedes any explicit reconstruction. Reconstructing an interaction does not mean ignoring this experience to start from scratch, but rather taking it as an initial clue from which to proceed, and then verifying and articulating it through the following steps.

The first step consists of reconstructing the relational situation. One must ask what the state of the relationship was at the moment the transactions took place: what roles were present, what mutual expectations seemed to be at play, what power dynamics existed, what emotional climate characterized the situation, and what events had preceded it.

The second step involves formulating hypotheses about the interpretation of the situation as constructed by the participants. The same situation can be interpreted in very different ways. Understanding an interaction therefore requires setting aside—at least temporarily—the belief that one's own interpretation is the only possible one and trying to imagine how the situation might have appeared to others.

The third step concerns the motivational system. Once we have formulated some hypotheses about the interpretation of the situation, we can ask ourselves what needs, desires, and values might have been at play among the various participants and what goals might have resulted from them.

The fourth step consists of identifying possible psychological rationales. What criteria might have guided each participant in choosing how to act? What behavior did they consider appropriate for achieving their goal? Different people may share the same goal and yet follow profoundly different rationales.

The fifth step involves reconstructing the strategies. Once a possible rationale has been identified, one must ask how it was translated into a concrete plan of action and how the various transactions contributed to its implementation.

Finally, it is necessary to observe the effects of the transactions. Each transaction modifies, maintains, or restores the relational situation, giving rise to a new cycle of interaction. Understanding an interaction therefore means observing not only the participants' intentions but also the consequences—whether anticipated or unanticipated—of their actions.

These steps do not constitute an algorithm capable of providing definitive answers. Rather, they serve as a guide for formulating better questions—and, when applying them in practice, one should not be surprised if the answers to distinct steps, particularly those related to motivation, logic, and strategy, tend to intertwine more than their sequential presentation would suggest.

When faced with behavior that seems incomprehensible, the question should not be, “Why did that person behave that way?” as if there were a single, immediate explanation.

It is generally more useful to ask:

- What was the relational context?
- How might it have been interpreted?
- What motivations might have been at play?
- What goals might have been formed?
- What psychological logic might have guided the behavior?
- What strategy might have been in play?

These questions do not eliminate uncertainty, but they help replace hasty judgment with a process of gradual understanding.

It is important to emphasize that this method should also be applied to oneself. Human beings spontaneously tend to reconstruct the motivations and reasoning of others, but much less so their own. Yet analyzing one’s own interactions is one of the most effective tools for testing and improving the theory that each person uses—often unconsciously—to guide their behavior.

Understanding interactions does not yet constitute meta-interaction. The latter, in fact, requires that the process of understanding be shared with the other participants in the interaction. However, without a good ability to understand interactions individually, it will be difficult to build a shared understanding.

The method presented here serves primarily a conceptual purpose: to demonstrate the logic by which the theoretical model of this essay can be applied to understanding a real interaction. Those seeking a more practical version—structured as a sequence of more detailed questions and designed for direct use (including in writing)—will find a practical elaboration of this same method in Appendix B.

In the concluding chapter, we will introduce precisely this possibility: using the theoretical model of interaction not only to understand others but also to reflect together on lived interactions, thereby constructing a meta-interaction capable of improving the quality of relationships.

11 Meta-Interaction

So far, we have considered the understanding of interactions as a predominantly individual activity. We have seen how it is possible to observe a sequence of transactions and formulate hypotheses about the relational situation, the interpretation that the participants have constructed of it, their motivations, their goals, the psychological logic, and the strategies that may have guided their behavior. This understanding already represents significant progress compared to the spontaneous interpretations with which we normally judge ourselves and others. However, an obvious limitation remains: the reconstructions developed by a single observer, however plausible, are still only hypotheses.

There is, however, another possibility. When two or more participants in an interaction decide to reflect together on what has happened, comparing their respective interpretations, motivations, goals, psychological rationales, and strategies, they give rise to a particular type of interaction, the object of which is another interaction. We will call this activity “meta-interaction.” Meta-interaction therefore consists of consciously applying the theoretical model of interaction to the analysis of an interaction actually experienced by the participants themselves.

The purpose of meta-interaction is not to determine who was right, who was wrong, or who is responsible for a particular outcome. Its goal is to build as shared an understanding as possible of the process that produced the observed transactions. For this reason, the typical questions in a meta-interaction concern not so much the behaviors as the processes that generated them: how the relational situation was interpreted, what motivations were at play, what goals were intended to be pursued, what psychological rationales seemed appropriate, and what strategies were actually adopted.

A meta-interaction could unfold along a path similar to the one proposed in the previous chapter. Participants could jointly reconstruct the relational situation, compare their respective interpretations, articulate needs, desires, values, and goals, discuss the psychological rationales that guided their choices, and analyze the strategies actually adopted. In this way, transactions cease to be merely judged and become the subject of a shared understanding.

Of course, meta-interaction does not guarantee that participants will reach an agreement. Interpretations may continue to diverge, goals may remain incompatible, and psychological rationales may remain profoundly different. Its value, therefore, does not lie in eliminating conflicts, but in making them understandable. Understanding does not necessarily mean agreeing or approving. It means being able to reconstruct the path through which a particular behavior became, from the other person’s perspective, a reasonable or at least understandable choice.

Many conflicts persist because each participant constructs extremely simplified explanations of others’ behavior. People readily attribute malicious intent, selfishness, superficiality, meanness, or stupidity, while much more rarely do they ask themselves what interpretation of the situation, what motivations, and what reasoning might have led a person to behave that way. Meta-interaction invites us to replace immediate judgment with a much more nuanced process of reconstruction.

To function, however, meta-interaction requires certain conditions. First of all, participants must be willing to question their own interpretations, at least in part. They must also have a common language that allows them to distinguish the different levels of the interactive process. Finally, they must accept the possibility that their own psychological reasoning may not be the only reasonable way to interpret a situation or pursue a goal. When these conditions are not met, meta-interaction risks becoming yet another source of conflict rather than a tool for understanding.

It should also be noted that there is a structural limitation that concerns not the psychological conditions just listed, but the very possibility of initiating a meta-interaction. As noted in the first chapter, not every relational situation is intersubjective: when it is internalized—when the other is

absent, gone, or merely imagined—the resulting tension can never be subjected to the direct confrontation that meta-interaction requires, simply because the other is not in a position to participate in it. The same applies to the triadic configurations discussed in Chapter 8: when the third element toward which the two participants hold an attitude—whether shared or divergent—is a real person available for dialogue, meta-interaction can, in principle, include that person; when it is an absent person, an institution, a value, or a symbol, meta-interaction can only be conducted by the two direct participants, and the object of their disagreement remains, by its very nature, excluded from the discussion. In both cases, the meta-interaction retains its usefulness—it still helps the participants present to understand one another better—but it can never achieve the full mutual verification that defines it in its most proper sense: that between two participants who can truly respond to one another.

A more fundamental difficulty must be added, one that the conditions just listed are insufficient to avert. Meta-interaction, as will be observed shortly, is itself an interaction, and as such is also subject to psychological logics and strategies—including non-cooperative ones. A participant may therefore propose or accept a meta-interaction not to genuinely understand the other's point of view, but as a strategic move: to feign openness to dialogue in order to elicit the other's admission or surrender, while keeping one's own position intact. In this case, the meta-interaction does not cease to be such—it remains, formally, an attempt to reflect together on a previous interaction—but it is co-opted for a purpose that betrays its stated aim. This essay does not propose a criterion for distinguishing, from the outside, a meta-interaction conducted in good faith from one conducted in bad faith: it merely points out that the risk exists, that it is not eliminated by the participants' declared willingness alone, and that a comprehensive theory of meta-interaction should address it more fully than this essay does.

A distinct difficulty—but one equally capable of undermining meta-interaction without any bad faith on anyone's part—concerns the power dynamics among the participants—an element that the first chapter explicitly included among the components of the relational situation. The three conditions listed above presuppose a symmetry that, in many of the relationships this essay considers as possible contexts of use—a parent and a child, a manager and an employee, a teacher and a student—is rarely present in equal measure. The person in the weaker position may feel implicitly compelled to question their own interpretation, to show willingness to cooperate, and to acknowledge that their own logic is not the only reasonable one—without the other participant being subject to the same pressure, and without either party deliberately intending this as a form of manipulation. In such cases, meta-interaction may, in its concrete form, prove to be less symmetrical than its theoretical definition suggests: not because it is used in bad faith, as in the case just discussed, but because the relational situation in which it takes place entails an asymmetry that none of the three listed conditions is sufficient, on its own, to neutralize.

It is important to note that meta-interaction is itself an interaction. Even as they reflect together on the previous interaction, the participants construct a new relational situation, interpret it, activate new motivations, formulate new goals, apply new psychological logics, and devise new strategies. The theory proposed in this essay therefore also applies to meta-interaction, which is not an activity external to interaction but rather a particular reflective form of it.

The practice of meta-interaction could have very broad applications. It could be used in couple relationships, families, work groups, organizations, schools, psychotherapy, conflict mediation, and, more generally, in any context in which people have an interest in better understanding how they interact. In these collective contexts, the levels of relationship and social network introduced in the first chapter come explicitly into play: a meta-interaction conducted in a work group or within a family concerns not only the individual transactions just exchanged, but also the established relationship that has bound those participants over time, and sometimes the entire network of relationships—colleagues, other family members—in which that relationship is embedded. It does not automatically eliminate misunderstandings nor does it reconcile truly opposing interests, but it can reduce misunderstandings, make differences more explicit, and foster the search for more informed solutions.

Ultimately, meta-interaction represents the main practical application of The Psychology of Interacting. While the previous chapters have sought to construct a theory of how human transactions arise, meta-interaction proposes a concrete application of that theory: to help individuals jointly understand their interactions and, when they deem it appropriate, consciously modify them.

12 Toward a Culture of Interacting

Human beings spend a considerable part of their lives interacting. Through these interactions, they build friendships, families, groups, organizations, institutions, and societies. A significant portion of individual and collective well-being, cooperation, conflicts, trust, and quality of life depends on them.

Yet, despite their importance, interactions are rarely considered a distinct subject of study in everyday life. We study personality, emotions, communication, language, organizations, institutions, and many other aspects of human experience, but we much less frequently seek to understand the overall process through which individuals continually build and modify their relationships.

This essay has proposed a possible response to this gap. It has sought to describe interaction as a dynamic process in which a relational situation is continually modified, maintained, or restored through a succession of transactions. It has also proposed a model that distinguishes different levels of this process: the interpretation of the situation, the motivational system, goal formation, psychological logics, strategies, and observable transactions.

Of course, no model can fully capture the complexity of human interactions. Relationships are influenced by biological, cultural, historical, economic, and social factors, which this essay has considered only to the extent necessary to construct a general theory of interaction. The proposed model therefore does not claim to replace other psychological or sociological perspectives, but rather to offer a common language capable of more easily connecting them when the issue at hand is interaction.

Furthermore, two distinct limitations must be acknowledged. The first is a limitation of applicability: the proposed model describes with a certain naturalness those interactions in which interpretation, motivation, and strategy—however rapid and unconscious—maintain some recognizable sequence. It has greater difficulty describing truly impulsive reactions—a burst of anger, a gesture of panic, a word spoken on instinct—in which interpretation and motivational reaction seem to collapse into a single instant, without it being possible to distinguish, even ideally, one phase from the other.

The second limitation is more radical: as shown in Chapter 4, even in the most reflective interactions, the boundaries between interpretation and motivation, between interpretation and logic, and between logic and strategy may never have been truly distinct. This limitation does not depend on the speed of the reaction; rather, it concerns the very possibility that the categories proposed here describe a real structure, rather than being a useful but partly artificial framework.

If the proposed theory is at least partly correct, it also suggests a different educational perspective. Learning to interact should not merely mean acquiring good manners, communication skills, or negotiation techniques. It should also mean learning to observe one's own interactions, to reconstruct their processes, to recognize one's own psychological logics, and to critically compare them with those of others.

From this perspective, meta-interaction takes on a special role. It is not simply a communication technique, but a reflective practice through which individuals seek to understand together how they have constructed a given interaction. If it were to become more widespread, it could help make many relationships more transparent, reduce certain misunderstandings, and foster more conscious forms of cooperation. Of course, it would not eliminate conflicts, since many of them stem from genuinely incompatible interests. It could, however, help distinguish inevitable conflicts from those fueled primarily by misinterpretations, misunderstood objectives, or incompatible psychological logics that have never been made explicit.

The Psychology of Interacting, as a model of analysis, does not in and of itself propose a new morality: as a theory, it does not establish which goals are just, which values should be preferred, or which strategies are, in the abstract, superior to others. This essay has not, however, refrained from offering ordinary moral judgment when it deemed it appropriate—such as when it observed, regarding triadic configurations, that a group dynamic based on the exclusion of a third party can be harmful. The task of theory differs from that of moral judgment, and the two remain distinct: understanding how human beings construct their interactions does not, in and of itself, amount to approving them, nor does it require suspending all evaluation once that understanding is achieved.

Every theory is, inevitably, provisional. Even the one proposed in this essay will need to be corrected, expanded, or possibly replaced if new observations reveal its limitations. Its value will therefore not depend on its claim to be definitive, but on its ability to help us better understand real-world interactions and to suggest new questions, new research, and new applications.

If this essay succeeds in prompting even a few readers to observe their own interactions more closely, to suspend their immediate judgment more often, and to ask themselves how others might have interpreted a situation, what motivations guided them, and what reasoning shaped their behavior, it will likely have achieved its primary purpose.

Understanding interaction does not mean perfectly predicting human behavior or eliminating conflicts. It means acquiring a richer way of observing what happens every day among human beings. Every new insight makes a more conscious choice possible; every more conscious choice can change, at least in part, the way we build our relationships. It is in this ability to understand before judging, and to reflect together before reacting, that the most important contribution a Psychology of Interacting can offer likely lies.

Appendix A – Glossary of The Psychology of Interacting

Behavior

Any observable manifestation of an individual, perceivable at least potentially by another, that may influence a relational situation. It includes both intentional and unintentional behaviors.

Communicative (Transaction)

A property of a transaction that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: that the sender produces it with an intention—even a minimal one—to signal something to the other; or that the receiver attributes to it a meaning sufficiently salient to enter into their active interpretation of the situation. Not all transactions are communicative in this sense: an involuntary blush, for example, remains a transaction without being communicative.

Triadic Configuration

A situation in which two participants (P and O) hold an attitude—positive, negative, or ambivalent—toward the same third element (X), which may be a person present or absent, an institution, a value, or a symbol, provided that the attitude is sufficiently salient and stable to influence the transactions between P and O. A concept that builds upon and extends Fritz Heider's theory of cognitive equilibrium.

Desire

A motivational state that directs an individual toward states of the world, situations, relationships, experiences, or objects considered pleasant or preferable, even if they are not indispensable.

Interact

A process through which two or more individuals, or an individual and an internalized relational situation, continuously modify, maintain, or restore a relational situation through a succession of transactions.

Interaction

A sequence of interconnected transactions that unfolds within the same relational situation or its ongoing evolution.

Interpretation of the Relational Situation

A process through which an individual constructs the meaning of the relational situation in which they believe themselves to be. Interpretation guides the motivational system, but may in turn be influenced by it (see Chapter 4 on their possible inseparability).

Logic

A relationship—implicit or explicit—between a situation and a conclusion (if... then...), or between a goal and a perceived appropriate way to pursue it. Unlike the rules of a computer program, to which the conditional structure is compared here, psychological logic does not remain fixed over time but is formed, strengthened, or weakened as a result of experience.

Psychological logic

A relatively stable set of criteria—more or less conscious—through which an individual determines how to act appropriately to achieve certain goals in various relational situations.

Meta-interaction

An interaction whose object is another interaction. It consists of an attempt by two or more participants to jointly reconstruct and understand the relational situation, the interpretations, the “ ” motivations, the goals, the psychological logics, the strategies, and the transactions that characterized a previous interaction. It presupposes that both participants are real and open to dialogue: it is therefore not

applicable, in its full form, to internalized relational situations or to the absent third element of a triadic configuration.

Motivation

Any internal condition that directs an individual to seek or avoid certain situations, leading them to seek them out, maintain them, modify them, or prevent their change. In this essay, emotions—such as fear—are not treated as autonomous motivations, but as affective signals that make a threat to a need, desire, or value already present in the motivational system perceptible.

Goal

A specific outcome that an individual decides to pursue in a given relational situation. The goal emerges from the interaction between the motivational system and the interpretation of the relational situation.

Personality

A relatively stable set of an individual's psychological characteristics. This essay does not take personality as its direct subject of study, but its conceptual framework—motivational system, psychological logics, emotional dispositions, and other relatively stable elements—can be used to characterize it indirectly.

Psychology

A discipline that seeks to understand the conscious and unconscious logics through which human beings interpret situations, formulate goals, and produce behaviors.

Psychology of Interacting

A branch of psychology proposed in this essay. It studies the process through which individuals, by interpreting a relational situation, formulate goals, activate psychological logics, devise strategies, and produce transactions that modify, maintain, or restore the relational situation.

Psychology of Interacting (Model of)

According to the theory proposed in this essay, every transaction can be understood by reconstructing the following process: a relational situation is interpreted by the individual; the interpretation is compared with the individual's motivational system and leads to the formation of one or more goals; the goals activate psychological logics that guide the choice of strategies; the strategies translate into transactions, which modify, maintain, or restore the relational situation, thereby initiating a new cycle. The process is not strictly linear. Some links in this chain are feedback loops between distinct elements; others may never have been such from the outset (see Chapter 4).

Power Balance

The actual or perceived distribution of participants' ability to influence the relational situation and each other's behavior. An asymmetry in this area can limit the effectiveness of the meta-interaction even in the absence of any manipulative intent.

Relationship

A relatively stable bond between two or more individuals, built, maintained, or transformed through a multitude of interactions over time. The boundary between a relational situation lacking a specific history and a true relationship is gradual, not clear-cut.

Social Network

The set of relationships in which an individual is embedded.

Relational Situation

The state of the relationship between two or more individuals at a given moment. It includes, among other elements, roles, mutual expectations, power dynamics, the emotional climate, constraints, recent

events, and any other element that the participants consider relevant. It can be intersubjective, when it involves another person who is actually present and capable of responding, or internalized, when the other person is absent or imagined and the situation belongs entirely to the mental life of the person constructing it.

Motivational System

The set of needs, desires, and values that, at a given moment, guide the formation of an individual's goals. In this essay, these three components are treated as interrelated rather than hierarchical, for the sake of clarity.

Strategy

A plan of action through which an individual seeks to apply one or more psychological logics to achieve a specific goal in a particular relational situation.

Transaction

The basic unit of interaction. Any behavior, whether intentional or not, that alters, maintains, or attempts to restore a relational situation, provided that it is perceptible, at least potentially, to the other participant. A transaction may constitute the initiation of a new interactive sequence or the response to a previous transaction; it may also be communicative or non-communicative.

Value

A criterion by which an individual evaluates what they consider to be right, important, desirable, or worth pursuing.

Immediate Experience

A still unformed, often ambivalent sensation that precedes or accompanies the explicit articulation of an interpretation. It includes the interpretation not yet articulated in words, but is not limited to it: it may also incorporate the effect of signals that never cross the threshold of an active interpretation.

Appendix B – A Procedure for Understanding Interactions

The theory proposed in this essay can be used as a tool for observing human interactions. The goal is not to produce definitive explanations, but to formulate increasingly plausible hypotheses about the process that led one or more people to behave in a certain way.

The following procedure can be carried out individually or, when conditions permit, transformed into a meta-interaction.

It can be applied to any interaction: one's own interaction, an interaction witnessed as an observer, or an interaction described in a novel, depicted in a film, or reconstructed through a testimony. Of course, the available information varies from case to case. Those who participated directly in the interaction have their own immediate experience, but they know only indirectly the mental states of the other participants. The external observer does not have anyone's immediate experience, but can sometimes observe the situation with greater detachment. Finally, in imaginary or reconstructed cases, the quality of the analysis depends on the available information. In all cases, however, the procedure remains essentially the same: only the data from which one can start changes.

If you participated directly in the interaction

Before beginning the reconstruction, it is helpful to reflect on one's own immediate experience, as it represents privileged information to which no outside observer has access.

- What was I feeling, even before I could explain it?
- Did I feel attraction, repulsion, or both?
- Was I afraid? If so, of what?
- Was I afraid of losing something important?
- Was I afraid that the other person would understand thoughts, emotions, intentions, or desires that I would have preferred to keep private?
- Did I feel stuck or unable to decide how to proceed with the interaction?
- What transactions did I want to carry out but did not?

This step does not yet provide an explanation of the interaction, but it offers a starting point for the subsequent reconstruction.

1. Define the Interaction

Identify which interaction you wish to understand. It is helpful to define the participants, the context, and the time frame to be analyzed with sufficient precision.

2. Reconstruct the relational situation

Describe the relational situation at the beginning of the interaction. What were the participants' roles? What mutual expectations seemed to be present? What were the power dynamics? What was the emotional climate? What prior events might have influenced the interaction? It is also helpful to ask whether a third element—an absent person, an institution, a value, or a symbol—that is not shared equally by the two participants is contributing to the observed tension: a triadic configuration of this kind can generate misunderstandings that nothing in the direct relationship between the two participants alone would suggest.

3. Reconstructing the Transactions

List the main transactions in the order in which they occurred. It is important to distinguish between what was actually observed and personal interpretations. It is also helpful to consider transactions that one or more participants seemed on the verge of carrying out but, for some reason, did not: a silence, a question held back, an avoided response, an interrupted gesture, or a postponed decision can all be important elements in understanding the interaction.

4. Formulate hypotheses about interpretations

For each participant, ask yourself how they might have interpreted the relational situation at different points during the interaction. What intentions might they have attributed to others? What opportunities or threats might they have perceived? What consequences might they have anticipated?

5. Formulate hypotheses about the motivational system

What needs, desires, and values appear to have been at play? Which of these might have come into conflict?

6. Reconstruct the goals

What goals is it plausible that each participant sought to pursue? Did the goals remain the same throughout the interaction, or did they change?

7. Identify the psychological rationales

What criteria seem to have guided the participants' choices? What behavior did they consider appropriate for achieving their goals? Are there alternative rationales that might have led to different strategies?

8. Reconstruct the strategies

What course of action seems to emerge from the sequence of interactions? Did the strategy remain constant, or did it change during the interaction?

9. Evaluate the effects

How did the interactions alter the relational situation? Were the goals achieved? What intended and unintended consequences did the adopted strategies produce?

10. Reconsider the Entire Process

In light of the previous observations, verify whether the hypotheses formulated are still plausible or need to be modified. Understanding an interaction is almost always an iterative process: new observations may require revising even the hypotheses formulated in previous steps. Steps 4, 5, and 7 in particular—interpretation, motivational system, psychological logics—should not be treated as watertight compartments: the answers to these questions often tend to intertwine more than their numbered sequence suggests, and it is not a flaw in the procedure if, during the reconsideration phase, it proves difficult to keep them entirely separate.

If you participated directly in the interaction, it is helpful to compare the reconstruction you have obtained with the immediate experience from which you began. Does the elaborated explanation now make the initial sensations understandable? Do the blockage, ambivalence, fear, or attraction find a plausible explanation in light of the reconstruction? Are there aspects of the experience that the model still fails to explain?

This procedure is not an algorithm capable of producing definitive answers. Rather, it represents a discipline of observation, the purpose of which is to slow down immediate judgment and replace it with a progressive reconstruction of the interactive process.

When the analysis is conducted together with the participants in the interaction, each step can become a topic for discussion. In this case, the procedure transforms into a meta-interaction, in which the goal is not simply to determine who is right, but to understand how each participant constructed their own path from the relational situation to the observable transactions.

Before undertaking this step, it is worth bearing in mind two limitations. The first concerns cases in which the relational situation of one of the participants is, at least in part, internalized—when an absent or deceased person comes into play, or a third element of a triadic configuration that cannot be consulted: in these cases, the procedure remains useful for the individual participant, but the meta-interaction, in its full form of mutual verification, can never include what belongs solely to the mental life of the person who internalizes it. The second concerns the power dynamics among the participants: when the relationship is asymmetrical—a parent and a child, a manager and an employee—the person in the weaker position may feel implicitly obligated to a level of openness that the other is not expected to offer to the same degree, even if neither party intends this as a form of pressure. Recognizing this potential asymmetry does not prevent the meta-interaction from taking place, but it helps to conduct it with greater awareness of its concrete limitations.

The proposed procedure does not claim to be complete or definitive. It may be modified, simplified, or expanded in light of experience. Its purpose is to offer a method that helps observe interactions in a more systematic, explicit, and, hopefully, comprehensive way.