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## The relational experience in the psychoanalytic situation

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*Is man's ego firmly enclosed within itself and tightly circumscribed within its boundaries of time and flesh?  
Do not many of the elements of which the ego is made up belong to the world before and outside him, and is not the statement that someone is absolutely no one else an assumption of convenience, which conveniently overlooks all the steps through which the consciousness of the individual is united with the general consciousness?*

Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*

**ABSTRACT.** – The author explores the psychological dimensions of relational experience in the psychoanalytic situation, declined in accordance with the tradition of interpersonal psychoanalysis. After a review of the literature on the topic, H. S. Sullivan's original thinking on the subject is examined, retrieving and updating the three levels of experience, prototaxic (body), parataxic (visual image and dream), and syntaxis (language). After describing the four meanings through which these forms of relational experience are elaborated and conceived in the interpersonal psychoanalytic literature, the author highlights some suggestive analogies with the thinking of Bion and of Wilma Bucci.

**Key words:** Relationship experience; intercorporeality; prototaxic experience; parataxic experience; syntaxis experience.

### Introduction

I was stimulated to write this article following the intention expressed by the editorial staff of *Ricerca Psicoanalitica* to focus on relational move-

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ments in Italy by asking the main protagonists to describe a concept they consider important characterising their theoretical approach, or by sending a brief contribution/reflection on the topicality of relational orientations in Italy. Personally, I have carried out my clinical activity for over thirty years in the area of the psychoanalytic orientation of the American school of interpersonal relations, which refers to the work and original thinking of the American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst H. S. Sullivan. This thinking produced one of the three psychoanalytic schools with which the relational orientation is usually linked (Mitchell, 1988; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). These schools are: interpersonal psychoanalysis, the psychology of Self, and the English school of objectual relations. I wish to point out that in the context of the topic selected by the Journal as its focus, I have chosen a fertile concept, one that is a harbinger of further developments, namely the concept of the *experience of the relationship* in the psychoanalytic situation, clearly formulated by Sullivan in his works, and further explored by later authors. Here are some of the reasons that support our choice of this important concept:

- the formulation of the concept in Sullivan's terms can still be considered the basis for the description of therapeutic action in interpersonally oriented psychoanalytic psychotherapy, bearing in mind that it allows, as we will explain later, to 'keep within' this description the concept of the unconscious, the architrave of the psychoanalytic orientation to therapy;
- Sullivan's formulation of the concept can be considered to lie at the origin (acknowledged or not in the specialist literature, it does not matter here) of some current developments in the modalities of therapeutic action, such as, for example, that of Wilma Bucci (Bucci, 1997; 2021) in the field of long-term psychotherapy, and/or that of Lorna Benjamin (Benjamin, 2003) in short-term interpersonal psychotherapy, thus showing itself to be an epistemologically heuristic concept and, as mentioned above, a harbinger of possible new developments;
- Sullivan's formulation of the concept has its original basis in Darwinian phylogeny, having been inspired in that formulation by the sociological school of early symbolic interactionism, a philosophical and cultural perspective headed by the Chicago sociological school. This school had as one of its main exponents George Herbert Mead and developed its concepts in the broader philosophical sphere of American pragmatism, which was headed by the Chicago Metaphysical Circle, one of whose main exponents was William James, as well as, of course, Chauncey Wright, the brilliant and unfortunate American philosopher who first proposed, when Darwin was still alive, the origin of consciousness in phylogeny as a Darwinian adaptation mechanism to the consequences of the interruption of the relationship with the environment. Commenting on Mead's work, as part of his exposition of the thinkers who most influ-

enced him, Sullivan concurred with T. V. Smith, who pointed out that '*Mead undertook more seriously than many other philosophers the task left by Darwin to speculative thinkers, namely the elaboration of a pure natural history of the psyche. He soon enunciated the thesis...that the psychic is a temporary feature of the empirical interaction between organism and environment concomitant with the interruption of that interaction*' (Sullivan, 1953, p. 33). Sullivan developed a concept of the Self, and more generally of personality development, based entirely on this quotation, giving primary importance in child development to the interruption of the child-mother bond due to the interference of the latter's experiences of distress;

- significantly, this Sullivanian approach appears consistent with current acquisitions in affective neuroscience, in particular the work of the Estonian-born American psychologist and neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (Panksepp & Biven L., 2012; Panksepp & Davis, 2018). In his *The Emotional Foundations of Personality. A neurobiological and evolutionary approach* (2018) he begins to write a natural history of the psyche, which Mead had hoped for a hundred years earlier. His concept of *nested BrainMind hierarchies*, on which his natural history of personality is based, articulated in the three processes, primary (emotions rooted in the body), secondary (intentional learning in relation to the environment), and tertiary (use of language), acknowledging heuristic value to the three modes of the experience of interpersonal relationships formulated by Sullivan (appropriately updated to current conceptions), i.e. the prototaxic mode (bodily emotional experience), the parataxic mode (emotional experience formulated through symbolic but non-verbal visual and sound images with conscious and unconscious intentional value), and the syntaxis mode (experience expressed and represented through verbal language for the social communication of internal affective states and actions);
- yet the formulation of the concept of the *experience of the relationship* which Sullivan elaborated having in mind mainly the psychotherapeutic clinic while drawing inspiration from the cited Authors, finds its heuristic superimposability in the three modes of coding experience elaborated by Wilma Bucci, non-symbolic non-verbal (experience coded through bodily perceptions and sensations), symbolic non-verbal (experience coded through images and sounds with a symbolic non-verbal valence) and symbolic verbal (experience coded in a derivative way through language). This model, as is well known, is firmly anchored in scientific experimentation. We could say that Bucci's modes of experience constitute a modern actualisation of the modes of experience developed by Sullivan;
- although one of the earliest criticisms of Sullivan's thinking was that it

was not psychoanalytic, in particular because of its emphasis on the Self understood as a precipitated reflection of the evaluation, acknowledgement, approval and disapproval of others, a concept of Self that Sullivan took from Mead, Cooley and Baldwin (Sullivan, 1953) and thus an essentially social Self, the subsequent evolution of interpersonal psychoanalysis led to the full recovery of the concept of the unconscious within that of the experience of the relationship, notably in the prototaxic and parataxic modes of experience. In particular, Sullivan's notions of covert (unconscious) relational processes, and of imaginary personifications of the relationship (conscious and unconscious images of the Self reflected by the other), have given a significant contribution and boost to the definition of an unconscious, whose contents arise in the context of the interpersonal relationship. The idiosyncrasy towards all that is social in the first generation of psychoanalysts (Gill, 1994), and issues of psychoanalytic institutional politics have historically contributed to this epistemological error in the evaluation of Sullivan's thinking. Pier Francesco Galli was very clear on whether or not to consider Sullivan's thinking as psychoanalytic. In the introductory note to the 1993 Italian edition of Sullivan's *Colloquio psichiatrico* (1954), after pointing out with regard to Sullivan's work, that '*...speaking in terms of psychotherapy and not psychoanalysis, was a way of being left alone*', he appropriately quotes Enzo Codignola, who, in this regard, had already pointed out in the first edition of the book (1966), that '*A certain prudence was advisable in delimiting the scope of Sullivan's approach with respect to the overall construction of psychoanalytic theory. I believe that today the explicit presentation of Sullivan as a psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrist, and his contribution to the circumscribed area of the treatment of psychosis, reduces the dimension of the theoretical challenge launched by his line of thinking to the stratified stereotypes of traditional psychoanalytic thinking*'. On the other hand, the social dimension of psychoanalysis as a clinical experience has long been widely accepted in the *psychoanalytic mainstream*, especially following the work of Bion, as Ferro and Civitarese authoritatively point out when they write that '*Bion's conception of the unconscious is based on the concept of dream-like waking thought and the radically social vision of the birth of the subject*' (Civitarese & Ferro, 2018). In some ways, my contribution was inspired by the above passage by Codignola and one should recall that the scholars wishing to set out in this direction, for a deeper understanding of Sullivan's thinking, can be counted on the fingers of one hand (Amadei, 2001), and his seminal contribution has been all but forgotten.

- a further reason why I propose the concept of the experience of the relationship in the interpersonal perspective is that despite its rootedness in Darwinian phylogeny, it frees itself from this biological rootedness in

the secondary (parataxic experience) and tertiary (syntaxis experience) levels, attaining a purely cultural perspective which allows the subjective and unique experience of the subject to be fully accounted for. Man retains an emotional root in phylogeny but expresses his unique subjectivity in the non-verbal and verbal symbolic experience within the cultural matrix of the relationship with the other;

- the concept of the experience of the relationship in the interpersonal perspective is once again congruent, albeit in a different theoretical framework, with other psychoanalytic models that are in vogue today, such as Bion's thinking and Wilma Bucci's thinking. I will subsequently come back to these conceptual and clinical overlaps, although not as systematically as I would like to. Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relations also had some interesting implications for cognitive therapy (Safran, 1984).
- finally, Sullivan's emphasis on the role of the other as the constitutive foundation for the Self (along with subsequent developments of this concept) opens up an interesting heuristic possibility of dialogue with philosophers belonging to the so-called epistemology of the relation, *i.e.* philosophical thinking that emphasises the importance of the role of the other in the profound knowledge of human experience. Martin Buber is the best known, but I also have in mind Emmanuel Lévinas, Gabriel Marcel, Franz Rosenzweig and Ferdinand Ebner, as well as Ricoeur, Patocka and Derrida, and also the Italian philosopher Carmine Di Martino, whose books *Segno, gesto, parola* (Di Martino, 2005) and *Il linguaggio e la filosofia* (Di Martino, 2012) examine the concept of experience in the light of the philosophical approaches of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and, above all, Mead (one of the main original cultural sources of Sullivan's concept of experience in the interpersonal relationship, as already pointed out), opening up ample possibilities for a heuristic dialogue with the thinking of the interpersonal psychoanalytic tradition, a dialogue, for those who wish to undertake it, that is certainly a harbinger of new concepts and elaborative possibilities for clinical metapsychology. Once again, with regard to philosophical dialogue, the Sullivanian notion of the process of transforming parataxic experience (dreams, private images of the Self) into the verbal representation of experience (syntaxis experience of the relationship), a process that Wilma Bucci calls '*referential activity*' and that Sullivan calls '*consensual validation*', can lead to interesting developments in the dialogue with certain philosophers of language, such as John L. Austin, Walther J. Ong and John R. Searle. I will not discuss these heuristic possibilities of Sullivan's thinking here, nevertheless it is important to mention them in order to highlight their innovative value that is still present today.

Having exhaustively explained the main reasons for selecting the concept of *experience of the relationship* in the interpersonal perspective and having exhaustively pointed out the historical rootedness of this concept in the thinking and work of H. S. Sullivan, I will now present its main constituent psychoanalytic dimensions. I will do this, however, by rereading the concept in the light of my thirty years' experience both in clinical practice and in studying the specific literature on the subject, in a circular relationship that has allowed me to reach an updated and modern view of the concept and, in my opinion, a better vision for its use in clinical practice.

### The experience of relationship: a look at interpersonal literature

In an article published in 1984, Held-Weiss pointed out that within the interpersonal tradition and its later developments, the therapeutic action of transformation and psychic change develops through the interweaving of two processes that mutually interconnect in the clinical practice, the cognitive-hermeneutic process and the relational-experiential process (Held-Weiss, 1984). In the field of relational-experiential processes (a subject that interests us here, as mentioned in the *Introduction*, although we will not examine the first type of process), the literature of the interpersonal tradition has from time to time highlighted, as the therapeutic action of relational experience in the psychoanalytic situation, the role of a new experience of the other, for example in the work of the following authors, Fromm-Reichmann (1950), Arieti (1974), Thompson (1950), Fiscalini (1988), the role of a new experience of Self in Wolstein (1981, 1985), the role of a new experience of Self and other that is interconnected with the pathogenetic patterns of the past, in Tauber and Green (1959), Greenberg (1986), Levenson (1972), Hoffman (1990), Bromberg (1980), Issacharoff (1979), and the role of the immediate experience (Ehrenberg, 1974), the experience of relationship in which one reaches a point of maximum contact, affective closeness and intimacy with the patient without a fusion, respecting the separateness and integrity of both participants. Darlene Ehrenberg's (1992) concept of '*peak intimacy*' well expresses the importance and significance of this moment of intense affective contact. Moreover, Ehrenberg's concept of '*peak intimacy*' in several ways recalls Daniel Stern's concept of '*Now moment*' (*mutatis mutandis* the conceptual framework of reference, of course) whose transformative and therapeutic values have been clearly described by the famous New York psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in one of his last publications (Stern, 2004). All these authors have made an extraordinary mark, especially after the 1950s, on the interpersonal psychoanalytic literature that has studied the characteristics of the experience of the interpersonal relationship which play a significant role in initiating and sustain-

ing the patient's therapeutic transformation. Kavanagh (1995) sums up, in a review of the interpersonal literature on therapeutic action, the main descriptive modes of the transformative factors of the interpersonal relationship experience. He describes the following elements which can be considered descriptive dimensions of relational experience (Kavanagh, 1995, author's translation): *'the patient needs an experience not an explanation'*, *'the I-you relationship creates a climate of trust and security for the patient and is both supportive and nurturing'*, *'a new relational experience can modify relational patterns with expectations of distrust experienced during development'*, *'the new experience consists in the different context, the different climate within which dissociated experience or fragments of dissociated experience emerge through the marginal processes of the field'*, *'importance of the mutual dependence between analyst and patient (therapeutic symbiosis)'*, *'the new experience consists in the central value of the transference interpretation'* and the affective way in which it is experienced by the patient, *'the patient in proceeding in analysis experiences himself as self-generative of new perceptions and meanings'*, *'the patient experiences the analyst at the same time as very similar to and very different from the patient's historical experience of his own significant figures who have marked the development of his personality'*, the patient experiences the analyst in *'an equal measure of anxiety and security'* (Kavanagh & Kavanagh, 1995; 2009). All these descriptive dimensions of relational experience provide useful and meaningful guidance in clinical practice, but they do not indicate the psychic levels of the relationship with the patient, or the modes of communication through which they occur. The current re-examination of the modes of relational experience described by Sullivan can, on the other hand, advance the understanding of the clinical experience in this direction.

### The experience of interpersonal relationships

Sullivan placed two important cultural foundations at the basis of his work, represented on the one hand by the tradition of thinking of the early symbolic interactionism as proposed by the Chicago School of Sociology, and on the other hand by the psychoanalytic tradition of thinking, revisited in the light of American dynamic psychiatry, with particular reference to the thinking of Adolf Meyer, among others. While these two roots constituted the general source of inspiration for his work, he points out that the specific interest of his approach is based on two assumptions (I quote his words verbatim): *'The history of our science includes two contributions (Meyer's thinking and that of Mead, ed.) that I would like to recall at this point in an attempt to establish as precisely as possible the reasons in favour of the interpersonal approach. Needless to say, Sigmund Freud's work lies at the*

*base of this entire phase of psychiatry*' (Sullivan, 1953). But he points out in *The Psychiatric Interview* that *'We are only interested in the early fruit of Freud's genius. The phenomena that appear when conducting long interviews with the technique of free associations, together with the study of the transference deformations that accompany or precede the verbal material, are indeed essential in overcoming the discontinuities that had hitherto prevented the formulation of a comprehensive psychology of psychic contents. Freud revealed that the specific limitations of personal consciousness originate in experience. With this discovery he paved the way for the scientific study of the individual, as opposed to that of the mind, brain and glands'* (Sullivan, 1954). Sullivan acknowledges the contribution of the *'early Freud'* by placing emphasis on the real dimension of the experience of the analyst-patient relationship. Edgar Levenson even posits this aspect as the originating concept to any introduction to interpersonal thinking. At the beginning of his contribution to a Symposium of the American Psychoanalytic Association, dedicated to the presentation of the various psychoanalytic models (1985), he points out, *'Paul Valery wrote that an artist with a modern sensibility has to spend his time trying to see what is visible, and - more importantly - trying not to see what is invisible. He went on to say that philosophers (but, he might have added, also psychoanalysts) pay dearly for their attempts to do the opposite. If it were possible to encapsulate a complex psychoanalytic position in a formula, the one just quoted could be termed the essence of interpersonal psychoanalysis'*. This emphasis on the perceived reality of the relationship, rather than its unconscious contents, together with its cultural roots in the social psychology of symbolic interactionism, earned Sullivan the label of a non-psychoanalytic thinker because his thinking does not deal with unconscious life, but rather with conscious, *i.e.* social, life, attaching greater importance to the 'I', namely the cultural 'I'. Now, this may be considered true, but the emphasis on the role and functions of the EGO in Sullivan, is never described in antithesis to the unconscious processes. There are numerous passages in his work in which it is possible to point this out, but for the sake of expository convenience I will only mention a few here. In *Clinical Studies* (1956) Sullivan defines the unconscious mental process as the *'rest of the personality'* - *'From the moment the ego-system begins to emerge, it is possible to distinguish three aspects of the personality process fairly early on: first, the alert and active ego; secondly, that part of the personality which is not readily accessible to consciousness, i.e., the rest of the personality (which in another context might be regarded as the whole personality, of which the ego would constitute the eccentric part); thirdly, the personality in sleep, during which the ego is relatively inactive (...)'*. In *Interpersonal Theory* (1953), Sullivan defines unconscious processes as *'covered processes'* - *'At this point a distinction must be made, which will remain important from child-*

hood to the end of life: the distinction between what can be observed by a participant observer and what can never be observed but must always be the result of induction based on the observed material. This is the distinction between the uncovered processes of interpersonal relations and the covered processes'. In *Psychiatric Interviews* (1954) with regard to the definition of a clinical interview he points out that - '*...although only two persons are present in the room, the number of more or less imaginary persons involved in this group of two is sometimes high. Indeed, it may happen two or three times within an hour that whole new sets of these imaginary 'others' are present in the field*'. In a passage, quoted by Klerman *et al.* which is very explanatory of how Sullivan intended to integrate the unconscious and infantile experience into his approach to the Self, he points out that '*A social or interpersonal approach does not deny the importance of the unconscious mental process, of the infantile experience (...) but these aspects realise the capacity to determine behaviour by influencing the patient's definition of the situation here and now*' (quoted in Klermann *et al.*, 1984, p. 167). Sullivan, in the concept of '*Definition of the situation here and now*' comprises unconscious mental processes and infantile experience, and also includes a prospective aspect of the possible evolution of the relationship (Chrzanowski, 1977). Thus, to return to Sullivan's object of study mentioned earlier, namely '*the phenomena which appear when conducting long interviews*', we can note that the relational experience expressed verbally in analytic dialogue (syntactic experience) always includes experiential experiences pertaining to the preconscious and unconscious sphere of the relationship (parataxic and prototaxic experience). This inclusion takes place in the sense that 'talking to each other' (Borgna, 2015), what we feel and what we are able to say to each other to define our relational situation, the therapeutic relationship, is on the one hand an expression of preconscious and unconscious processes, while on the other hand it creates them thanks to the actual affective bond between the two personalities of the analyst and the patient which is created within a therapeutic framework, a setting. The valorisation of the real and social dimension of the relationship inevitably leads to valorising reciprocal perception and the contact zones of sensory perception (Sullivan, 1953) as vital sources of conscious and unconscious experience in the relationship. Freud himself stated that in defining the reality principle as one of the two principles of psychic occurrence, sensory and related processes of consciousness became significant in relation to the external world. Freud wrote in *Two Principles* (1919), with regard to the recovery of the implications of the '*fonction du réel*' described by Pierre Janet as a deficient function in the neurotic individual, that '*The increased significance of external reality also increased the importance of the sense organs directed towards the external world and of the consciousness connected to them. Consciousness now learned to*

*understand sensory qualities in addition to the qualities of pleasure and displeasure, which alone had hitherto been of interest to it'. And a little further on, 'A specific function was thus established, which had the task of periodically exploring the external world so that the data coming from it was already well known in case an urgent inner need arose - the function of attention, whose activity lies in meeting sensory impressions on their path instead of waiting for their spontaneous appearance'. In this passage, Freud emphasised the two channels of contact with the outside world, namely sensory perception and the attentional function, just like Sullivan, who identified in the attentional function the zone of relational contact that would be altered if the relationship itself conveyed experiences of distress, giving rise to selective inattention and the various forms of dissociation.*

But let us now proceed to provide a more precise definition of the three modes of relational experience described by Sullivan. The prototaxic mode of experience (1953) *'may be regarded as the discrete series of momentary states of the sensory organism, with special reference to the zone of interaction with the environment. It is as if all that is sensory, all that is represented in the centre, were a luminous picture with indefinite but nevertheless vast limits. Each bulb that lights up on the picture for each discrete experience then becomes, if you follow me, the same basic prototaxic experience. Perhaps this might suggest that I assume that, from the beginning to the end of life, we are exposed to a succession of discrete configurations of the momentary state of the organism'*. It is clear that in the relationship with the environment, with the other, a continuous flow of sensory elements is generated that are configured into discrete momentary states and that give rise to emotional mutual recognition. These discrete sensory states, which in other respects can be defined as inter-corporeality, constitute the basis on which the personality, the Self, is emotionally founded. In the processing of experience in the parataxic mode, perception continues to be characterised by momentary states but the different perceptual elements occur together, are concurrent and are not logically related. Stern (1995) writes that *'Parataxic symbols are private symbols; that is, the relation between symbol and referent may not be valid for anyone else. Since dreams are composed of these private symbols and are seldom organised logically or coherently, they are the obvious first example of later life experience occurring in the parataxic mode. But on further reflection, it is clear that a good deal of waking experience also goes on in the parataxic mode'*. He then goes on to point out, *'Sullivan believes that much of life is lived in this mode. Since parataxis is an associative process (i.e., parataxic symbols come together on the basis of events occurring simultaneously), distortion is not intrinsic to it. A parataxic symbol may be a distortion, but it need not be one'* (Stern, 1995, author's translation). Finally, the syntaxis mode of experience is represented by meaning that has become socially shared through language and

gesture, through consensual validation. Dialogue and communication with the other, therefore, particularly analytical dialogue, takes place within the framework of an underlying experience characterised by discrete sensory states that are transformed into parataxic elements (visual perceptions, hearing, dreams, fantasies) which, from an eminently private meaning, may find partial explicit recognition in the relationship through their further transformation into syntaxis experience, which allows their social recognition. One has to imagine that, like in a 'nest' structure (Panksepp & Davis, 2018), these three modes coexist in the experience of the analyst's and patient's mutual analytic relationship, interacting and influencing each other. It is important to emphasise the mutual influence of these three relational dimensions, even though there is some controversy in the literature regarding the interpretation of Sullivan's position, as some of his passages on the topic express different and opposing positions (Stern, 1995). The experience of the interpersonal relationship can therefore range from the emotion, which is subsequently transformed into a visual image such as a dream and is then encompassed in the words that can only express a communicable part of it; the relational experience can also move in the opposite direction and from the words in the situation of 'talking to each other' a fantasy is generated such as a dream, an unconscious visual or sound image, for example in the prosodic aspect of language (Mancia, 2004). In the interpersonal literature, the relationship between the three levels of experience, as mentioned above, is not always seen as characterised by mutual influence in both directions. Sullivan also considered them, for example, in the context of a maturational hierarchy of the person, whereby only the evolution of prototaxic and parataxic experience into syntaxis experience ensured psychic health, stating that the hold over experience through language or gesture, and in any case its access to some level of linguistic representation, ensured protection from mental illness, thus placing himself in analogy with Freud when he famously states that '*where there was an Es, there the EGO must take over*'. Generally speaking, the interpersonal literature on the three levels of experience, which we will not examine here, ascribes to these levels one of the following four meanings: successive stages of child development, experiential sources of interpersonal difficulties immersed in distress, ways of defining the unconscious, preconscious and conscious within the framework of interpersonal theory, enduring modes of experience in which throughout our lives we creatively elaborate our Selves (Stern, 1995). One author who treats the three levels of relationship experience as developmental stages is Bromberg (1980), who emphasises the parallel with Piaget's developmental stages in the evolution from concrete to representational to abstract conceptual thinking. Of particular importance is the conception of the three modes of experience in the field of dynamic psychopathology. From early childhood to adolescence the interpersonal bond

can be invaded by distress, and this provokes certain safety operations of the Ego such as substitutive processes, like selective inattention, primary and secondary dissociation of varying degrees of severity (Bucci, 2021), and ‘as if’ processes. In other words, the relational Ego, which Sullivan calls the Ego system or the Self system, performs a series of defensive operations to protect the personality and allow a relational contact with the other even if in limited or zero conditions of exchange and learning. An example is the use of verbal language in a parataxic manner in the obsessive personality, where words can have a magical valence with a totally private meaning that cannot be shared socially. As regards the use of the three levels of experience as ways of defining the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious in the framework of interpersonal theory, reference is made to Donnel Stern, who, in several passages in his work, based himself on Sullivan’s assertion that ‘*all that is repressed is simply not formulated*’ (Sullivan, 1940), and conceptualised parataxic experience as ‘*not formulated experience*’ (2003). Finally, the three levels of experience, taken to be enduring modes of experience that we can use throughout life for the purpose of the creative elaboration of our Self, include the eccentric position of Tauber and Green with respect to Sullivan, indeed almost in opposition to Sullivan, regarding the pervasive value of parataxic experience in our lives. In an important essay, translated into Italian, *L’esperienza prelogica* (1959), they posit parataxic experience as the ubiquitous basis for all human relationships, and the fount and creative source of all new thinking. Parataxic relational experience, *i.e.* the experience that generates in reciprocal relational experience unconscious images of a sonorous or pictorial visual type, dreams, is ubiquitous in all our relationships, and is at work in an incessant and continuous manner, beneath the surface of awareness or at its margins. I believe that Tauber and Green’s creative conception is undoubtedly of greatest help, both in the psychoanalytic process but also as a creative element in our everyday relationships. Through the pre-logical (parataxic) dimension, the patient shares his personality with the analyst, and the analyst shares his personality with him, thus becoming part of the drama of the patient’s life. William Cornell, in chapter three of *The Somatic Experience in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (2015), called ‘*Entering the gesture as if it were a dream: a psychoanalyst encounters the body*’, provides a beautiful example. Many examples are similarly given in the work by Tauber and Green. I have developed a formula that summarises this approach, the following interpersonal formula:

$$(b) a A \nearrow B b (a) / f(T)$$

This formula represents the evolution over time, represented by the symbol  $f(T)$ , of the relationship between A (analyst) and B (patient), where  $a$

represents A's conscious intentionality towards B, *b* represents B's conscious intentionality towards A, and (*a*) and (*b*) represent B's and A's unconscious intentionality respectively generated in the reciprocal interactive perception of the other.

I conclude my presentation of the experience of the relationship in the psychoanalytic situation by pointing out that I have not dealt with the question of the interaction between the three levels of experience, *i.e.* I have not dealt with the process of *consensual validation*. I have merely provided a definition. Lawrence Brown, in his *Glossary of Psychoanalytic Interpersonal Concepts* (Brown L.O., 1995), defines it as 'A term used by Sullivan for the achievement of genuine mutual understanding. Such an outcome is the result of interpersonal communication that (1) is fully based on the structure and meaning of signs and symbols in a shared culture and (2) is derived from experience in the syntax mode, so that the meaning of communication is not based on private or unique meanings or associations' (my translation). In the wake of this definition, I would like to conclude this section by quoting Ferro and Civitarese's reflections that all perspectives concerning the unconscious, and thus also the one we have just presented, 'offer us a 'poetic' account of experience, which is all that matters to foster the feeling of living a full and authentic life' (Ferro & Civitarese, 2018).

### Current links with other psychoanalytic perspectives

At this point, having examined the main constituent elements of relational experience in the psychoanalytic situation from an interpersonal perspective, I would like to highlight the obvious analogies with Wilfred Bion's and Wilma Bucci's thinking. I will not discuss all the analogical overlapping of these perspectives, which would require a dedicated work which we propose to do in the future. As far as Bion is concerned, I will limit myself to pointing out how certain points of his thinking, such as the oneiric thought of wakefulness, the radically social nature of the genesis of the subject, find correspondence in Sullivan's notion of the definition of the relational situation, where the syntaxis (conscious) experience is continually nourished and stimulated by the parataxic and prototaxic (unconscious) experience attached to language through intercorporeality. As the conscious process gradually offers the possibility of socially expressing a part of the unconscious and pre-conscious (prototaxic and parataxic) experience, it 'poetises' itself by feeding from the latter's fountainhead. Again, Sullivan's important concept of basic experience as sensory perception, finds a substantial analogy with Bion's *B*-elements, as fuelling factors of the daytime dream through their transformation with

the alpha function. Edgar Levenson (2003), a present-day follower of interpersonal psychoanalytic thinking, in one of his lesser-known essays tried to illustrate and clarify the transformations that generate parataxic experience especially with regard to visual images, *'I would now like to suggest that our praxis is organised more around images than words, more around interactions than explanations. The analytical algorithm - the steps we take in doing analysis, regardless of metapsychology - and the unconscious flow of data, are both organised along visuospatial lines: It occurs to me that questions arise from visual images. One tries to understand the situation by picturing it or imagining it. Even our tool par excellence, free associations (and its corollary, detailed enquiry), consists more of visuospatial images connected and inserted in each other, than of plain language. The patient's free associations are usually, but not always, in visual, illustrated form, as are dreams'*. As far as Wilma Bucci is concerned, Sullivan's three levels of experience find a surprising overlap with the three modes of encoding experience proposed by the Denver scholar, namely verbal symbolic experience (with syntaxis experience) and non-verbal symbolic experience (with parataxic experience), and non-symbolic non-verbal experience (with prototaxic experience). Particularly striking is the phenomenological correspondence between the prototaxic mode and the subsymbolic mode of experience in Bucci (2021), *'Of great interest to psychoanalysis, subsymbolic processing is dominant in the processing of emotional information and emotional communication: reading the facial and bodily expressions of others, experiencing one's own feelings and emotions. All of these functions require processing that is analogue and continuous, not discrete, and that occurs in specific sense-modes, not in abstract form. We term this processing intuition, body wisdom, and other related modes. Crucial information concerning our body states comes to us mainly in subsymbolic form, and emotional communication occurs mainly in this mode. Reik's concept of 'listening with the third ear' is largely based on subsymbolic communication'*. It is evident that a significant consequence of considering the inter-corporeal interaction as the primary source of relational experience in the psychoanalytic situation, is the absolute unpredictability of the course of the treatment, since the *vis à tergo* of the clinical process is no longer only a dissociated, or disregarded content, but is flanked and intertwined with, and enveloped by, the part of the inter-corporeal interaction relating to the two specific persons, who make the encounter unique and unrepeatable. A large part of the relationship with the patient is thus constitutively unknown and cannot in any way be explored through a predefined technical procedure. I mention these correspondences because they point to the possibility of initiating a fruitful dialogue between these perspectives (Jullien F., 2012), in the foremost interest of the cognitive advancement of our discipline.

## Conclusions

In this paper I have presented a critical and up-to-date description of the concept of relationship experience in the interpersonal perspective. Obviously, I have not presented an overview of the interpersonal perspective with all its constituent elements because this was not the aim of my report; for example, I have not presented the cognitive-hermeneutic processes of the relationship, one of many concepts and processes available in the interpersonal psychoanalyst's toolbox, just as I have not presented the other constituent elements of the psychoanalytic situation in the interpersonal perspective, such as the elements of the therapeutic framework, which also have a primary influence on the quality of the relational experience in the clinic. Instead, I have given a detailed description of an important and perhaps priority concept for understanding the patient's process of transformation, which undoubtedly needs further exploration and understanding. A priority need of psychoanalytic research is to create possibilities for discussion and confrontation on clinical cases, according to methodologies and approaches that allow for an ever better descriptive possibility of the relational experience in the psychoanalytic situation, with ever better heuristic possibilities of understanding its therapeutic and transformative elements.

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