

Affects management and protection of the relation in cooperative interactions

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Abstract. We argue that in most cooperative interaction, as Goffman suggested it, the participants tend to manage their own feelings but also the feelings of the other participants, in order to preserve the relations among the group. From three cases of cooperative interactions, in situations of professional meeting, of collaborative choice, and of interactions between drivers, we see (1) how the appraisal of the situation, from which emerge the affects, depends on highly subjective determinants (2) how the affects have a complex organization and evolution which is hidden from the social scene (3) how the affects and their management orient the reactions in cooperative settings. The type of “re-situating” interviews that we conduct allows us to get a detailed analysis of these processes.

Keywords: coping, faces protection, appraisal, subjective interpretation, cooperative interactions, social relation, in-depth interviews.

Introduction

By now, we have a clear view that the affective aspects⁽¹⁾ of cooperation are not only a side effect that we can just ignore, but that they are at the core of the motivation to act and of the orientation of the person’s understanding and relation to the social and physical world.

According to Watzlawick & al [21], all types of interactions include two levels: the level of the content of the discursive exchanges, and the level of the relation between people. We can analyze our data of cooperative interactions from these two perspectives: (1) what is the task-oriented exchange, how do the participants solve their problem together and reach their common operative goal? (2) Or, how are the relations between partners constructed during this cooperation? Of course these two levels are interrelated.

¹ We use the term “affect” in a broad sense including various types of affective reactions, like emotions, moods, sentiments, feelings...

In the psychological literature on emotions we find results on the effects of affects on these two sides, but mostly at an individual level and not so much at a cooperative level. At the content and task level, it has been demonstrated that affects have an impact on individual action tendency [19, 17], decision making [8, 14], creativity [15], attention [3], memory [2] and judgment [1, 10]; at the relational level, Isen [13] and Carnevale & Isen [6] have shown that induced positive affects facilitate the process of negotiation and result in improved outcomes in a bargaining situation: people are more likely to reach the optimal agreement, they are also less likely to engage in aggressive tactics and better able to figure out the other person's payoff. That is this type of relational aspects that we will focus on here.

First of all, our data will confirm how affects are highly subjective and contextual; it is the very personal construction of the meaning of a specific situation which is the source of the affects, a constructive process which is generally called "appraisal" [16, 18] and which consists for the subject in interpreting and evaluating the situation, more or less consciously, in relation to his/her own concerns [11]. This process is seen by Damasio [8], in a neurophysiological perspective, as an association between a type of experience and its positive or negative effects which is stored as "somatic markers"; they intervene to orient the choice in situations of complex and uncertain decisions. That is to say that the appraisal process may be more or less the product of a low-level (the subject reacting immediately to the situation) or high level process (the subject being able, at different degrees, to think about the situation). Once the subject has evaluated the impact of the situation on his/her concerns and has reacted emotionally, s/he has to deal with the emotional situation.

Coping is defined as the efforts of a subject to manage a negative emotional situation [9] and is traditionally described as problem-centred coping (when the subject tries to solve the problem encountered) or emotion-centred coping (when s/he tries to change his/her emotions).

We will show here that the subject tries to manage the emotional situation not only for him/herself, but also for the group and for the other partners of the collaboration. If the group is not too competitive and conflicting, then it is functioning a minimum on negotiation, empathy and a search for mutual grounding and mutual respect, so that the global equilibrium of the group is not disturbed and that it is not turning into an aggressive escalation. The psychological literature on emotions is often subject-centred and not much group-oriented, dealing with his/her way of evaluating the critical situation and of coping for his/her own sake. Goffman's theory of faces management [12] is highly relevant because it takes into account the reciprocal objective of "maintaining faces" of oneself (face is an image of self with a social value claimed by the person) and of the others participants, by avoiding to threaten faces and by maintaining social order. The "face work" is the actions taken to be consistent with face, and losing face results in a loss of the internal emotional support that is protecting oneself in social situations. There are rituals around face management (thanks, agreement, repair ...) and other tact strategies.

Methodology: case studies and qualitative analysis

Our methodological approach is based on in-depth interviews with the subject right after the interaction so that s/he can describe his/her lived experience at a cognitive, sensory and affective level. The techniques of the “explicitation interview” [20] and of the self-confrontation (having the subjects watching the video of the interaction) are efficient to help the subject remembering precisely the situation, and we call them “re-situating interviews”. The subjects can then remember more easily the situation and describe step by step what were the impressions and affective states he was feeling during the interactions, the ideas and evaluations associated with them, the intentions and decisions he/she could take, and all other type of phenomenon that happened during the cooperation (within the limit of his/her remembering).

When possible we complete these subjective data with the video recording of the cooperative interaction (but sometimes an interesting emotional situation has occurred which was not recordable). We then analyse the observable behaviour of the subjects (mimics and postures mainly) and compare them to what is said in the subjective record via interviews (cf Agnès’ case). It is often fruitful to compare emotions which were felt internally by the subject with those which were expressed and socially observable.

We will present here three cases of particular interactions and analyse the subjects’ affective states, their appraisal (or subjective evaluation/interpretation) of the situation, and their way of coping, not only their own affects but also often the affects of their interaction partner for the sake of their cooperative social relation.

The case of Jacques: from subjective appraisal to social coping

The case of Jacques will indicate which are the personal and contextual determinants of the appraisal process, and how the interpretation of the interactional situation is highly dependant on the specific context and personal history of Jacques [5]. It is a case where the coping process is centred on himself and not on the interlocutor who is felt as aggressing him, but we will see how the protection of the group is still present in the way he is reacting to the insult.

Jacques is an engineer in a large industry of telecommunication who is forty five and who had once to rehearse a talk in front of his two bosses, B2 and B1 (B1 is also the boss of B2). When Jacques is finished with his talk, B2 says to him :

B2 – “*for a beginner you managed it pretty well*” (in French originally: *pour un débutant tu t’es bien débrouillé*”; all the following extracts are translated from French).

We will see how Jacques (with extracts of interviews), from his very subjective and contextual perspective, interpreted this intervention, reacted emotionally and managed the emotional situation. The data are extracted from the explicitation interview with Jacques (we had no video data of the original scene this time).

Determinants of appraisal process : Jacques' subjective interpretation

Jacques' subjective interpretation of the situation and of B2's intervention is expressed by him in these terms:

"J: that means, at least I understood it this way: you give talks though normally, at your age, you shouldn't do all that anymore, you're still on the front line, you don't have a boss position".

This subjective interpretation is based on different types of determinants which are instantiated by the specific context and specific past experience and history of Jacques:

- the discourse (see above) and the expressive attitudes that Jacques can see from B2 : *"J: He says that with a quietly ironic air"*
- the institutional context : *"It was a rehearsal for a talk that I had to give one hour later, so there was an important issue because we have been preparing this talk for one month ; we have a lot of pressure on it because that will be presented to several important directors".*
- the a priori representation of the interlocutor : *« (when he says that) I think : well it's his heavy humour, stupid you know, he is very humiliating this guy".*
- the relational history of the interlocutors, their previous common experiences : what directed me to this possible interpretation like 'you're old to do that', is that he already played this trick in another context (...) we already had a discussion like that on a problem of mobility that I would have".
- the cognitive state, like the expectations of the subject: *« I arrive at the end so now I think well now I can be quiet, I'm ready for the final talk; if I waited for something it was an encouragement".*
- the zone of affective sensibility : what we call the "zone of affective sensibility" of the subject is part of his concerns, and it is more specifically the subjects where he has a specific sensibility, that he is reactive to. This sensibility may be due to diverse origins, like some action that we took and that we are not proud of, or some sad memory, or what we consider as being a lack or a default we have, or some value which is very important for us and that makes us crazy when it is betrayed. The zone of affective sensibility corresponds to all the sensitive, delicate subjects for the person. For Jacques it seems that being an expert but not a manager in a large industry is felt as a difficulty, something which is not status-enhancing in the company *« It's not very easy to have a position of expert (and not manager) when getting old I would say ».*

All these determinants of one's subjective and evaluative interpretation of the situation include classical ones like the situational context and the beliefs based on past experience of the subject, but also this zone of affective sensibility which corresponds to the sensitive concerns.

Affects management by Jacques: from an internal anger to a soft reaction

We now develop the whole process of the affective reactions, the way he manages some of them (the coping process), and the social reaction chosen. Jacques sums up the process like that:

« *first I feel something like 'what a bastard' and then immediately after there's 'what do the others think about that', I mean BI, and 'how am I going to react?'... and somewhere also I feel threatened, an internal feeling of threat, that's the most worrying, we can say it's in the background.* »

a) Initial emotive reaction of anger and fight energy

The immediate reaction is a feeling of anger and a tendency of aggressing.

« *He says this little sentence, so yes I was upset, the first reaction I was about to punch him in the face, when I think 'what a bastard' there's also a bodily expression, I'm going to fight him, I look at him and the energy is this one.* »

b) Hidden feeling of threat

There is also, in parallel, a feeling of threat, of being downcast, but he tries to ignore it, to resist to it, because he is afraid that it is spreading; like a background affect that he wants to eliminate because it would prevent him to react by socially protecting his own face. It is a feeling which is hidden from the others and from himself.

« *about this threat I was thinking : if I begin to feel that, it will crush me, so I didn't want to go into it, because if I go into it, I will be totally crushed, I won't be able to express anything.* »

To try to ignore the emotion of threat is a form of coping, a way of managing this emotion that is really not welcome; it is not precisely a deny which would be unconscious, since here it is partly conscious, at least afterwards.

c) Looking at BI's reaction

The immediate social context is essential in the way one reacts to an insult, it can be felt as a support or as another adversary.

« *Then I saw that BI was a little bit shocked, so I used that a bit;*

- *how did you see he was shocked?*

- *because I looked immediately at BI to see how he was reacting and I saw that he frowned slightly, he had a mimic that I understood as 'he exaggerates', well you know, he seemed a bit upset.* »

d) Choosing a social reaction of indifferent denigration

Jacques then thinks about two possible reactions: either taking the position of someone outraged, or looking indifferent.

« *The first feeling that came : I think 'what a bastard' and I adopt an outraged position and I tell him something like 'next time you'll give the talk and we'll see if you're comfortable'... and then there's another feeling, a bit more secondary, another position that is to shrug my shoulders and to use in a way the third person and say to BI 'you see your assistant he is very heavy'; and that's the option I choose.* »

The choice of the way of reacting is called by Lazarus [16] the secondary coping process. This case of Jacques' short emotional sequence of interaction (it lasted less than one minute) gives information about the appraisal process determinants and about the coping process: how Jacques go from anger where he would tend to aggress physically B2, with the latent feeling of threat and depression that he wants to avoid, to a reaction of verbally showing that he is outraged. We note that, first he does not choose the immediate reaction which is the tendency of a physical aggression, and second he chooses the more indirect reaction; he does not address directly to B2 but he looks at B1 and shrugs his shoulders (a non-verbal behaviour, less explicit than a discursive one), meaning "he is heavy", "what can we get from him?", "I don't care, he is so stupid".

It is two ways (no physical aggression; indirect and non-verbal message) of not getting too much into the confrontation and of coping with the emotional situation in a way to calm down the aggressive reactions for the sake of the social relations.

This case also highlights how the emotions and more largely the affective states orient the actions : Patrick's way of reacting is the product of a management of his internal affects, and a compromise between his concerns and the social need to preserve the faces and avoid aggressive relations.

We can also see how the emotional reaction is complex and not of one block, with anger in the front stage and threat in the background.

The case of Patrick : car driving interaction and faces protection

The case of Patrick is extracted from a study on the feelings of psychological discomfort in driving situations.

This subject was describing how, when using a cruise control system, he is sometimes in an uncomfortable social situation: it is when he has asked the system to regulate his car at a certain speed; then his speed afterwards is constant; but if he goes down a street which goes up right after and that someone is overtaking him in the descent, then in the uphill slop the other driver sometimes slows down, but Patrick's speed being constant, he then goes faster than the other driver and overtakes him (except if he disconnects the system).

Patrick then speaks of a "*social malaise*" and says that "*it is not very positive*" because "*you give the image of someone who drives in such a way that it bothers the others*" (...) *you have this image of someone who behaves badly* (...) *then I think oulala he's gonna be upset, but I'm not going to disconnect my stuff to please him* ; *then I avoided to look at them when I overtook them, I'm afraid that his look would kill me.*"

It is clear that there is a slight feeling of shame and guilt and that it is threatening for Patrick's face. Clearly he would prefer to avoid threatening the face of the other driver because he would not have as a feedback this negative judgement of not being a civic person. This judgement is due to the fact that the other driver does not know that Patrick has a cruise control system, and that he does not act like that deliberately. If he would know that, he would probably not judge Patrick as severely. That is probably why Patrick does not want to disconnect his system. But still, he avoids

looking at the other, afraid to see this erroneous judgement in his eyes, and how he has been insulted by Pascal's act.

We have here a case of interaction where it is clear how people tend to protect the other's face, even when the consequences are slight and when Patrick does not know the other and will never see him again; also here Patrick's acts are not even illegal, it is not respecting an implicit rule that some (but not all drivers) respect most of the time: when you are overtaken you do not overtake right after, because it looks like a challenge and it risks to turn into a competitive interaction; so we see how the tendency of preserving a social equilibrium is powerful. It is difficult however to know if the protection of the other's face is based on empathy and concern for the group ability to cooperate peacefully, or on the risk to be threaten in return; probably a mix of both.

The case of Agnès : hidden and compensated frustration

Marie and Agnès' study is an "ecologically produced" situation of interaction where they were interacting with the common objective of finding a present for a friend. They were communicating remotely with an audio and video link; Marie was in a jewelery, Agnès was seated elsewhere and Marie was showing her the different jewels of the shop with a very small camera. Agnès was receiving the video image instantaneously and was looking at it on a small screen. This time Marie and Agnès were filmed by four cameras and we could compare observable behaviour and subjective reports [4]. They were then commenting the jewels, negotiating the collaborative choice and moving from one shop-window to another (Only Marie is really moving, Agnès is virtually moving with her, following the moves on the camera). They look at a first window, then a second one with silver jewels, but Agnès says that it is not the style of their friend, and the following exchange takes place:

M: - "yeah I quite agree with you yeah yeah yeah we'll not er we'll not dwell too long on the silver jewels

A: - yeah

M: - I think it is hmm wait, so I come back to the window er (M begins to move the camera from W2 to W1) the first window ok?

A: - yeah

M: - because after it's er after the prices ranges are higher so er I think that we will confine ourselves to this window I think that we will er

A: - yeah yeah yeah ».

We can see that from her discourse, Agnès seems to agree with Marie's proposal to go back and see the first window ("Yeah") and to confine to this first window ("Yeah yeah yeah").

Also the prosody and the mimics of Agnès could be informative on her affective state and we asked fifteen judges to evaluate Agnès' affective state during this video sequence, that they could see and hear several times [4]: 8 evaluated that she was in a positive mood; 6 evaluated that she was in a neutral mood; only 1 evaluated that she was in a negative mood (indicated by the intonation).

But when we look at the self-confrontation interview of Agnès concerning this sequence, it is striking to observe that she was in a much more complex state of mind: “A - so I said to myself, if we were going to look at the other showcases then we should look at the other showcases, and not come back to the first one therefore there was a movement a little contrary to what I would have liked to continue doing, that is to say, to go see the other showcases. There I felt a bit deprived, I told to myself: there is someone guiding for me (...) hmm... a little bit of frustration... of slight frustration... I said okay, this isn't going the way that I would like... as far as, in the choice that we made, this first pair of earrings that we picked out, that pleased both of us, the fact that regarding the silver models we both found that we didn't keep this option, there was a certain agreement regarding the choice. Therefore I said to myself, good, we are still in sync. Therefore we're participating in the same movement, this is why I think that I didn't feel more bothered by the fact that she wasn't necessarily going where I wanted to go (...) the frustration went up a notch because then she said: we're going to stick to this showcase, and there I felt frustrated because we still haven't gone round the store.”

The behaviour that can be socially observed and that Agnès shows to Marie is not indicative of these negative feelings of frustration and disagreement regarding the visual exploration of the shop. Though, with the mode of remote communication technology they use, Agnès loses the control of the spatial exploration and she does not appreciate that. But why hasn't she expressed her dissatisfaction to Marie then?

She explains that this frustration on one side of the collaborative activity (the mediated spatial exploration) has been compensated by the satisfaction on another side of the collaborative activity: the cooperative negotiation and choice concerning the present to choose collaboratively.

This result of compensation between different aspects of the collaborative activity is very interesting and it can explain why Agnès has not expressed her dissatisfaction concerning the shop windows she wanted to explore. She prefers to avoid expressing her disagreement and opposition to preserve the relation, as far as she is not that much disturbed, because on the main side of the collaborative activity (the collaborative decision) she is satisfied. This example let us guess how often one does not express an internal opposition to preserve the group harmony.

Conclusion

We have seen, with these three cases of interactions, that the subjects try to manage the emotional situation not only for themselves, but also for the group equilibrium and for the other partners of the collaboration. In Goffman's terms, the face protection and face management are active when Jacques calms down his internal anger after the insult and uses the alliance with the third participant to avoid a direct conflict. Patrick feels ashamed of his behaviour when he overtakes back the other driver and would like to explain to him that it is the fault of the cruise control system; he does not like at all this situation where he is risking to threaten the face of the other driver because he is not respecting the implicit rules; it is threatening for his own face, even in this situation which is rather anonymous and with low consequences. Agnès is also taking

care of the relation with Marie since she does not express her disagreement and frustration ; maybe she would express it if it was not compensated by a satisfaction about the main part of the collaborative activity, i.e. the common decision.

It is interesting to highlight how the technological tools transform the activity and the relation: Agnès depends on Marie to explore the space and it annoys her, Patrick's behavior and image are transformed negatively by the use of the system in this particular case. These affective aspects generated by the use of new tools must be integrated in the evaluation phases of the design process.

At a methodological level, we observe that with the "re-situating" interviews we gain a lot of information about the very short and fugitive emotional moment described by Jacques for instance; he can describe the determinants of the appraisal and the management of the different reactive emotions. Also with Agnès, and by comparing the video and her a posteriori verbalizations, we can distinguish the social front stage where she appears very serene and the emotions in the private backstage.

Finally, we conclude that the participants to a cooperative interaction avoid creating negative affects for the other participants and avoid showing their own negative affects, in order to maintain some tranquility of the group. But we still wonder which are the fundamental reasons for avoiding to threaten the faces? it is probably partly by empathy for the others, also for the group sake and social order, and finally because the feedback risks to threaten their own face at the end.

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