

## **I UNDERSTAND YOU BECAUSE I KNOW YOU**

**The influence of past embodied encounters on social understanding**

### **Acknowledgments**

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Imagine that you are sitting in a bar with a good friend, both of you immersed in passionate conversation. You enthusiastically raise your voice above hers to make an important point, but suddenly notice the waiter, who has approached your table and is looking at you with a notepad in his hands. You pause in the middle of the sentence to redirect your attention towards him and, in a lower voice, order your drink. Turning back to your friend you see her smiling at you the way she always does when you get too carried away with your talking. You know that she is a bit annoyed, but also that she is expecting you to continue – you smile back in apology and carry on with what you were saying in a calmer way.

How did you know that the waiter had approached you in order to ask what you wanted to drink? What made you recognize that your friend felt that you should have been more considerate instead of drowning her out? How did you understand that she was nevertheless waiting for you to carry on? These are questions related to social understanding – the phenomenon that refers to our ability to understand other people and know how to interact with them.

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In this paper I will talk about everyday social understanding in face-to-face social interaction of the kind described above. I will regard social understanding as a heterogeneous phenomenon that comes in many different forms and is supported by a variety of factors reaching beyond an individual's cognitive processes. The aim of the first part of the paper is to elucidate some of these factors by summarizing certain accounts of social understanding. After presenting some major difficulties of the traditional, so-called *mindreading* approaches, which view social understanding as a matter of attributing mental states to others, I will stress the ways in which one's understanding of the other is *environmentally supported* by sharing with them the concrete context of the unfolding interaction as well as the broader common framework of social practices and roles. I will show that the environmental scaffolding in face-to-face social encounters is always achieved through direct bodily interactions, making social understanding *situated* as well as *embodied* and inseparable from the interactional process. Arguing that interaction plays a central role in our understanding of others, I will present the enactive account of *participatory sense-making* (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007), which construes interaction as the coordination of behavior and meaning between two embodied subjects, while the phenomenological description of such coordination reveals that it can be experienced from the first-person perspective by various feelings of interconnectedness with the interacting other.

In the second part of the paper, I will focus on one particular type of such feelings: the *feeling of familiarity*. By conceptualizing it as an *existential feeling* (Ratcliffe 2005), I will describe feeling familiar with someone as a background orientation that shapes our experience of the possibilities offered by the (social) environment. I will consider how our present interactions can be influenced by our history of embodied encounters: through *intercorporeal memory* (Fuchs 2012a), our interactions with a familiar other can acquire self-sustaining internal patterns that implicitly guide our unreflective actions and contribute to how we experience and understand the other. I will argue that pre-reflective social understanding can be characterized as the ability to *appropriately respond to the possibilities of social interaction*. Since the set of actions that appear relevant to us in a particular social encounter – for instance, the possibility to smile, look away, touch or reflect upon what the

other is thinking – depends, in part, on whether we experience the other as familiar or not in the first place, I will suggest that the feeling of familiarity is not only a passive experiential correlate of historically structured interactional patterns. Instead, it also *actively contributes to social understanding* by enabling us to experience the actions of the other as already-having-been-expected and let ourselves be bound to the dynamics of social interaction.

## **1. Overview of some approaches to social understanding**

### **1.1 Understanding the other by reading their mind?**

Many approaches in cognitive science and philosophy of mind have attempted to explain social understanding in terms of *mental state attribution*. These views, often grouped under the term ‘mindreading’ (Spaulding 2010), suggest that we somehow infer the internal states of other people’s minds on the basis of observing how they behave and then use the knowledge of their mental states to explain their past or ongoing behavior and predict their future actions.<sup>1</sup> According to an influential representational theory of mind put forward by Jerry Fodor (1987), the central concepts that we employ in making sense of other people’s actions are the mental states of belief and desire. On this account, and many others inspired by it, you would understand the meaning of the waiter’s approach to your table by ascribing to him the intention of getting your order, and the belief that coming to your table would result in that; you would figure out the message behind your friend’s smiling face by attributing to her the belief that you were too loud, the wish that you would speak more quietly, and the desire to hear the rest of the sentence.

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<sup>1</sup> In relation to the question of the mechanism of mental state attribution, mindreading accounts are commonly divided into so-called *theory theory* and *simulation theory* approaches: while theory theorists claim that we ascribe mental states by inferring them from other persons’ behavior using folk psychological theories, simulation theorists maintain that, instead of theorizing, we simulate others’ mental states by using our own mind as a model (see Bermúdez 2005; Gallagher 2001, 2012; Spaulding 2010).

Phenomenological critiques of mindreading approaches (e.g. Gallagher 2001) point out that our everyday face-to-face social interactions very rarely include any conscious experience of either deducing others' mental states or using them to predict and explain others' behavior. Instead, for the most part, we seem to understand the other person unreflectively, skillfully, and without explicit deliberation. However, this in itself does not necessarily refute the idea that ascribing mental states plays the central role in social understanding. Indeed, many mindreading accounts (including Fodor's belief-desire psychology) take the reflective attribution of mental states to be only an occasional explicit manifestation of otherwise largely non-conscious reasoning, which is based on an implicit theory and is constantly employed in the background as we navigate through the social world. If one accepts that neither the process of attributing mental states nor the use of inferred mental states for making sense of others' behavior need to unfold on a conscious level, one might question the significance of the phenomenology of social understanding for accounts of social cognition. Emphasizing that the mindreading debate revolves around non-conscious, sub-personal processes, Spaulding (2010) even dismisses the happenings on the phenomenological level as completely irrelevant.<sup>2</sup>

Even if we disregard the phenomenological criticism, the fact that in most social encounters we do not seem to experience the processes of mental state attribution and/or explanation and prediction of behavior is not the only challenge to the mindreading approaches: another important objection is that these processes could be overly computationally demanding. This so-called 'computational argument' (Bermúdez 2005: 194) points out that, keeping in mind the speed and ease with which we mostly adjust to the behavior of others in social encounters, it is difficult to imagine how social cognition could be based on complicated and possibly time-consuming processes of attributing mental states to other people and subsequently explaining or predicting their acts. Bermúdez argues that our everyday social interaction simply does not fit the computational complexity that is believed to be necessary for mindreading – even more so when we take into account that our understanding of a social

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<sup>2</sup> For a defense of the relevance of phenomenology for accounts of social cognition, see Gallagher (2012).

situation frequently refers to the interdependent actions of several people at once. Understanding such a situation by attributing mental states to its many participants would require a “computationally intractable set of multiply embedded higher-order beliefs about beliefs” (ibid.: 196): in order to deduce the mental states of any particular participant, one would have to take into account the actions of all the other individuals involved and hypothesize about which mental states the participant in question would ascribe to them, and so on.

## 1.2 Social understanding is supported by the social world

In order to provide an alternative to the computationally implausible mindreading approaches, Bermúdez suggests that our everyday social understanding often primarily relies on our knowledge of the social situation we find ourselves in. He points out that rather than primarily making itself understandable through deciphering others’ minds, “the social world is often transparent, easily comprehensible in terms of frames, social roles and social routines” (Bermúdez 2005: 205). To return to the above example, when the waiter approaches your table, you simply need to recognize him as *a waiter*: the identification of his social role and the knowledge of related social practices will then enable you to understand and anticipate his behavior without any need for mental state attribution. In other words, understanding the waiter as an individual with typical behavioral patterns in a typically unfolding social setting does all the interpretative work that is necessary for you to interact with him; there is no need to even consider what he believes, desires, etc. Bermúdez thus argues that social understanding is often “a matter of matching perceived social situations to prototypical social situations and working by analogy from partial similarities” (ibid.: 204). That is to say, the way in which our more abstract and theoretical knowledge of the social world guides our particular face-to-face encounters is through comparing the ongoing interaction to typical ones. But is the relationship between prototypical and perceived concrete situations really so straightforward?

An interesting analysis of how abstract understanding of social roles enters more primary and pristine forms of social interaction was put forward by Alfred Schutz in *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967). Drawing from

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the fact that we experience and understand others in many different ways, Schutz argues that the social world is heterogeneous and can be divided into different regions depending on the degree to which the other is present to, or distant from, us in space and time. Among various forms of interpersonal understanding, the most elementary is the direct awareness of the other in a face-to-face social interaction in which the participants are directly bodily co-present. Schutz claims that this so-called *We-relationship* (ibid.: 163) – a pre-reflective, lived-through interaction in which the participants have an immediate experience and understanding of each other – is the foundation of all other forms of social understanding. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that pure *We-relationship* is only a *formal* concept. In social reality, social interaction always consists of much more than my pure awareness of the other's presence paired with their reciprocal knowledge of my awareness (ibid.: 168): *concrete* face-to-face social encounters, characterized by varying degrees of immediacy, intensity and intimacy, are instead shaped by factors that reach beyond one's current interaction. As such, they are never completely 'pure': they unfold against the background of a common intersubjective world within which my understanding of the other can be substantially supported by having direct knowledge of our shared physical and social environment. Furthermore, Schutz points out that we enter each particular encounter with the other person with a "whole stock of previously constituted knowledge" (ibid.: 169). What does this stock of knowledge consist of?

Schutz suggests that when other people are not directly and bodily present, we experience them in an indirect, even impersonal way by employing interpretative schemes of what he terms 'ideal types'. Rather than grasping a person as a specific individual self, we might for example abstractly conceive of them solely in terms of their social role. Similarly, although in a less anonymous fashion, we typify concrete people from our lives with whom we occasionally directly interact in terms of their character and traits. Importantly, the ideal types are not operative only in the absence of the other. As Schutz explains,

"they become part of our stock of knowledge about [the social] world. As a result, we are always drawing upon them in our face-to-face dealings with people. This means that ideal types serve as interpretive

schemes even for the world of direct social experience. However, they are carried along with and modified by the We-relationship as it develops. (ibid.: 185)”

It is thus possible to understand the other person in terms of his or her ideal type even in face-to-face interaction with them; nevertheless, through actual encounters, such impersonal understanding of the other can be enriched and can even change one’s conception of ideal types themselves. Interacting with a particular waiter might, for instance, change one’s understanding of what waiters do, and through that influence the way in which one will interpret waiters in general. Therefore, even though previously existing knowledge of the broader social world or of the character of the particular other guides our direct interactions with the other person, that same knowledge is in turn modified by the unfolding experience.

This identification of the double influence between generalized knowledge of the social world and concrete face-to-face social encounters elucidates the difficulty of discerning the *prototypical* from the *concrete* in Bermúdez’s above suggestion that we understand perceived social situations by matching them to prototypical ones. Ratcliffe (2007) adopts a more dynamical view of the relationship between shared social situations and concrete social encounters. He argues that our everyday social understanding is environmentally supported not by means of detached comparison of the two, but rather through our practical involvement with the environment. The framework of social norms, roles and functions against which we understand the other does not have to be known explicitly and independently of the specific interaction:

“Pre-established situations are not set in stone; they can be reshaped through interactions between people. We inherit situations but, through our interactions, we modify them. Hence there is a complex relationship between established norms and interpersonal interactions, involving two-way feedback between them. (ibid.: 180)”

Ratcliffe points out that our social interactions are implicitly guided by a common regulatory framework of the social world that limits the range

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of possible actions of participants and makes some of them more probable than others. In many cases we can therefore understand or predict the others' behavior without any reference to their internal mental states: our social understanding is instead supported by the shared (social) environment. In addition to being thus *situated*, Ratcliffe points out that social understanding is just as fundamentally *embodied*: the environmental support of our understanding of the other in face-to-face encounters is always achieved through concrete embodied interaction, which is characterized by a specific kind of bodily responsiveness of the participants. Described this way, social understanding can be regarded as a form of both situated and embodied cognition.

### 1.3 The central role of the process of interaction: the enactive perspective

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This complex intertwining of the general social world with the interactional process that I have described exposes the difficulty of pinning down the 'environment' of social encounters and suggests that both the 'achievement' of understanding the other and the broader environmental context in which we do so are inextricable from the process of concrete embodied interaction. For this reason, I find it problematic to study social understanding exclusively within the confines of any singular framework of, for example, extended, scaffolded, situated, or embodied cognition. The way in which understanding others depends on the environment can hardly be compared to the way cognitive processes are typically environmentally supported in the extended mind (e.g. Clark and Chalmers 1998) and/or scaffolded mind (e.g. Sterelny 2010) models. Unlike the paradigm cases of these accounts, which mostly describe individuals using environmental resources to perform goal-oriented cognitive tasks (a notebook for memorizing a particular piece of information, a map for navigating through the city, etc.), social understanding in face-to-face encounters can hardly be broken down into discrete tasks and resources.

In order to demonstrate this point, it could be said that your task in the bar episode was both to (implicitly) *understand* that your friend did not like you



raising your voice, but still wanted you to continue talking, and to *be disposed to (inter)act* accordingly (for instance smiling in apology and lowering your voice).<sup>3</sup> In that case, the patterns of your embodied interaction with her – the exchange of glances and smiles – could be characterized as the environmental support for this task, which would make them a kind of a resource enabling you to understand her. On the other hand, these same interactional patterns could be regarded as the goal of your social understanding, since the purpose of your understanding-related action is to modify them in appropriate ways. Reflecting on the complexity of such simple social situation reveals the inadequacy of limiting the cognitive processes involved in one's social understanding exclusively to one's individual 'cognitive' mind, thus separating them from the interaction itself as well as from the bodily and affective components of the social encounter. Furthermore, the difficulty of specifying the precise 'environment' that would support cognitive processes also puts into question the plausibility of treating social understanding primarily as a case of environmentally extended cognition.

I suggest that one of the most appropriate ways to study everyday social understanding is to approach it from the perspective of *enactivism* (Varela et al. 1991). The enactive approach argues that all cognition is embodied action; it regards cognitive processes as inseparable from the affective processes; and it locates cognition in the realm of the 'in-between', i.e. as a "relational process of sense-making that takes place between the [cognitive] system and its environment" (Thompson and Stapleton 2009: 26). Recent enactive accounts of social cognition view interaction as much more than just the mere context in which one's understanding of the other takes place or the process that unfolds as the product of such understanding – rather, they place it at the very core of social understanding. Since, as has been demonstrated above, the various elements that underpin our ability to understand the other are inextricable from the concrete embodied interaction, I think that acknowledging the central role of the interactional process is the only way to

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3 Since the pre-reflective understanding of the social situation, as will be argued below, already entails the disposition to act in a certain way, these are not separate steps, but rather two different aspects of the phenomenon of social understanding.

recognize the complexity of social understanding. In what follows, I will turn to the so-called participatory sense-making approach (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007), which takes interaction itself to be the foundation and source of intersubjectivity.

### 1.4 Participatory sense-making

The account of *participatory sense-making* (ibid.) approaches the question of how we understand each other by shifting the focus away from the individual's isolated mind to the 'in-between' space. De Jaegher and Di Paolo suggest that in face-to-face social encounters, the coordination of participants' behavior and sense-making activity can be frequently achieved through interactional patterns alone, without resorting to specialized cognitive mechanisms in their individual minds. They further argue that, as we jointly make sense of the world in social encounters, the interaction process emerges as an 'entity' that can acquire certain autonomy on its own, steering the ongoing episode of social interaction in ways that cannot be reduced to individual acts of the participants.

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In this view, my understanding of the other in a social encounter arises from the unfolding patterns of the ways in which we coordinate our behavior and meaning, while my actions and reactions are led in part by forces located outside of my mind within the dynamics of interaction. How do I experience the other in this joint sense-making process? From my first-person perspective, the other is, unlike in classical mindreading accounts, available to me through the way their autonomy guides my own sense-making activity. However, this availability is only partial, as the other is always experienced as the *other-in-interaction*. As De Jaegher and Di Paolo explain:

“We don't experience the other-in-interaction as totally obscure and inaccessible, nor as fully transparent (like an object fully constituted by my sense-making activity), but as something else: a protean pattern with knowable and unknowable surfaces and angles of familiarity that shapeshift as the interaction unfolds. Those patterns of change are influenced by my

own participation in the emergence and breakdown of joint relational sense-making, hence they are not totally alien. (2007: 504)”

According to this explanation, your understanding of your friend in the bar episode – knowing that she is displeased by the volume of your voice but also wants you to continue with what you are about to say – primarily stems from the coordination of your movements and the related generation of the patterns of meaning. Your experience of the subtle dynamics of the exchange of glances and smiles guides you to know how to interact and brings about your implicit understanding of how your friend feels.

Fuchs and De Jaegher have combined the so-called “dynamical agentive systems approach” (2009: 466) of participatory sense-making, which describes interaction as the coordination between two embodied subjects, with a phenomenological perspective. They suggest that, from the phenomenological viewpoint, the process of social interaction can be described using the notion of *mutual incorporation*, which refers to the “reciprocal interaction of two agents in which each lived body reaches out to embody the other” (ibid.: 474). The dynamical process of participatory sense-making is experienced, from the first-person perspective, as a pre-reflective bodily connectedness between the interacting agents. Through this bodily connectedness, often referred to using Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *intercorporeality*, the sense of the other person’s gestures is implicitly understandable to us prior to any intellectual analysis.

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“Communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person’s gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be read in the other person’s behavior. Everything happens as if the other person inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 191)”

According to Merleau-Ponty, the perceived behavior of the other does not ‘acquire’ meaning in an additional act of interpretation. Instead, “[t]he sense of the gesture thus ‘understood’ is not behind the gesture ... [it] spreads across the gesture itself” (ibid.: 192). In embodied social interaction, the

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bodily gestures of the other are thus directly perceived as meaningful, making intercorporeality the foundation of social understanding.<sup>4</sup>

By delving deeper into the phenomenological aspects of social interaction, Fuchs and De Jaegher stress the first-person experience of the aforementioned autonomy of interactional dynamics: the interacting participants can feel the guiding power of the interaction as the pull of the ‘in-between’, through which the interactional process acquires its own ‘center of gravity’ – “in engaging in a social encounter, there is an extent to which I surrender to the other and to the process of interacting” (ibid.: 476).

Could these feelings be regarded as constitutive of social understanding? As has been mentioned above, the enactive approach broadly maintains that cognition and affectivity do not belong to two distinct systems, but are rather inseparably intertwined. Already on the level of the individual organism, sense-making is carried out with regard to the features of the world that are perceived as meaningful and significant from the organism’s point of view. This meaning and significance are revealed by emotions, which, from the enactive perspective, are defined as both bodily and cognitive-evaluative processes (Colombetti and Thompson 2008). As in any sense-making activity, cognition and emotion are also inseparable in social understanding. As pointed out by Colombetti and Torrance, “autonomous organisms bring to their encounter their own forms of cognitive as well as affective understanding, and as a consequence affectivity is perturbed and transformed as the encounter unfolds, and as it generates its own meaning” (2009: 4–5). While being grounded in motor coordination and bodily resonance between the participants, participatory sense-making is therefore also necessarily *affective* and characterized by various levels and degrees of emotional interconnectedness.

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4 Knowing what other people think or feel, and how to interact with them, often becomes more explicit and comes to involve higher, more concept-laden processes of social cognition as well as more detached, observational stances towards the other (especially when we are not engaged with them in face-to-face interaction). However, Merleau-Ponty and the proponents of enactive and phenomenological approaches to social cognition presented in this paper (see also Gallagher 2012) consider the described form of unreflective, non-conceptual embodied understanding as prior to those higher levels both *developmentally* (as the first form of understanding others that emerges in infancy) and *categorically* (as the primary form of adult social cognition, that continues to be the operative in how we understand others throughout our lives).

## 2. The feeling of familiarity and its contribution to social understanding

In what follows I will focus on one particular type of these feelings of interconnectedness: the *feeling of familiarity*, which, as I will argue, actively influences the course of unreflective social interaction as well as the ways in which one experiences and pre-reflectively understands the other. One can experience social situations as familiar without necessarily having the feeling of knowing the other person(s) involved in them, for example when sitting on a tram on one's everyday commute to work or routinely ordering a drink from an unknown waiter. However, in many social encounters – most obviously in long-term interpersonal relationships – it is primarily *the other* whom we feel familiar *with*. This feeling familiar with the other could be described as a background sense of trust in the fact that we (can) know the other, which shapes the general way in which we experience the social situation. Ratcliffe (2005) refers to the category of such subtle experiences, often overlooked in philosophical discussions on emotions, with the term *existential feelings*. Although existential feelings are “feelings, in the sense that they are bodily states which influence one's awareness”, they are, unlike typical emotions, “not directed at specific objects or situations but are background orientations through which experience as a whole is structured” (ibid.: 46). I might, for example, experience the world as homely or strange, a situation as comfortable or awkward, or being with another person as familiar or not – feeling in a certain way, but not about anything in particular. Ratcliffe argues that these different ways in which I can find myself in the world can be best understood in terms of my pre-reflective receptiveness to the world's possibilities.

The feeling of familiarity thus designates a background orientation that shapes one's general experience of social situation and the possibilities for action provided by it. This subtle bodily feeling does not necessarily have an obvious emotional valence: one can feel familiar with another person in an emotionally neutral way, or even when the other or the social situation as a whole is experienced as unpleasant. Furthermore, feeling familiar can come in different degrees of intensity: a very basic sense of familiarity, a primary trust that one can in principle understand the other as a human being, is most likely

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necessary for, and present in, nearly all instances of social interaction. However, I will focus specifically on the more pronounced feeling of familiarity that is especially characteristic of relationships with well-known others with whom one has interacted in the past.

## 2.1 Body memory and the history of embodied encounters

As has been explained, face-to-face social interactions are characterized by certain patterns of coordination of movement and meaning generation that guide the unfolding of the encounter and can take on a kind of autonomy. These patterns can be modified by a variety of factors, most obviously by the interactors themselves. Of particular interest of the present analysis is that the influence of these modifications can *extend over time*: having its roots in our past embodied encounters, the internal structure of interactional patterns is not limited to a single episode of social interaction, but can rather be preserved from one episode of interaction to the next. As De Jaegher and Di Paolo point out: “Sustained interactions can be expected to have undergone several instances of loss and regain of coordinating structures, each of them leaving the interactors slightly better able to remain in such interaction or reinitiate it” (2007: 496).

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The patterns of one’s present interaction are shaped by the history of one’s embodied encounters through the so-called *body memory*, with which Fuchs (2012a, 2012b) denotes the totality of acquired bodily dispositions, skills, and habits that implicitly shape one’s present experience and behavior. In contrast to explicit memory, which consists of conscious recollections of past events and knowledge, the implicit memory of the lived body *re-enacts the past in the lived present*: it guides our everyday unreflective action through the modification of our bodily dispositions, of which “I often remain unaware, which in fact come to meet me from outside, namely in the form of the attractive or repelling objects, the inviting characters and field structures of my environment” (2012b: 75). Fuchs recognizes body memory as the ‘unconscious’ foundation of our habitual dealings with the world, but stresses that this phenomenological conception of the unconscious differs from the traditional views of the psychoanalytic

tradition. Rather than being regarded as inaccessible to the subject and hidden below consciousness, in the depths of our psyche, the unconscious of the lived body is to be found in the ways we relate to the world and manifests itself in our unreflective, habitual patterns of behavior.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from enabling us to learn how to ride a bike, explaining how we can still find our way around our childhood house in complete darkness, or providing us with an excuse as to how we have yet again ended up standing at the kitchen window with a cigarette in our hand, body memory also plays an important role in unreflective social interaction. Intercorporeality, which has been in the previous section described as the foundation of social understanding, is influenced by our past through the so-called *intercorporeal memory* – a dimension of body memory with which Fuchs refers to a “pre-reflective, practical knowledge of how to interact with others in face-to-face encounters which is acquired already in early childhood” (Fuchs forthcoming: 11). Our intercorporeality is shaped from our early days onwards, and throughout the course of our lives comes to reflect our entire history of embodied encounters with others. Thus, “[i]n each social encounter, both partners unconsciously re-enact a history of embodied socialization and relationships that have shaped their styles of interacting, their empathic skills and intuitions as well as their class- and culture-specific habitus” (ibid.: 18).

My general intercorporeal style, formed through my individual autobiography, tends to slightly alter when I interact with people with whom I share a specific dyadic past of embodied encounters. Through the so-called *joint or dyadic body memory* (ibid.: 16), repeated interaction with a particular other can develop its own characteristic interactional patterns which implicitly

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5 The idea of an unconscious that is partly accessible to the subject might sound confusing: How can we have experiential access to that which we are, by definition, not conscious of? Zahavi points out that, in order to be able to claim that consciousness is essentially and directly first-personally given, it is not necessary to argue for its total self-transparency. We can be pre-reflectively aware of the unconscious, when the latter is understood “in the sense of subjective components, which remain ambiguous, obscure and resist comprehension” (Zahavi 2002: 79). The terms ‘unreflective’, ‘pre-reflective’, ‘implicit’, and ‘unconscious’ in this paper (whose seemingly interchangeable use throughout the text reflects the way they are originally used by the authors) generally refer to this *ambiguous dimension of pre-reflective experience*.

guide both me and the other to adopt a specific shared style of interaction that would re-emerge with each new encounter. Regardless of the topic of the conversation, I might for instance automatically speak very animatedly, use a lot of gestures, and burst into laughter at the slightest occasion with one friend, while with another friend it might feel just as natural to behave in a calmer, quieter, and more reserved way. Everyday life provides us with numerous other examples that demonstrate how, when interacting with a particular person, we end up – for better or for worse – being pulled into the ‘same old’ interactional dynamics without any conscious intention to do so.

Going back to the example of the social interaction in the bar, we can now see that your body memory has contributed to your immediate and unreflective grasp of what your friend’s smile meant: firstly, you have been through similar interactions with *people in general* many times in your life; and secondly, you have been through similar interactions with *this particular friend*. If she were to be replaced with a random passer-by, it might be much more difficult for you to discern the hint of annoyance paired with the willingness to continue listening to your story from the smile of this new, unfamiliar person.

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## 2.2 Social understanding in unreflective (inter)action

As has been argued, most of our everyday social interaction unfolds in the absence of explicit reflection. However, that does not mean that it amounts to a mere automatism. In his analysis of unreflective action, Erik Rietveld (2008) points out that although unreflective acts are not completely conscious and voluntary, they are neither unconscious in the strong sense of the term and experienced as ‘automatic’ or beyond our control. Instead, they involve peculiar, ‘intermediate’ types of agency, cognition, and experience that are guided by one’s current environment. In the flow of acting unreflectively, the features of one’s environment are not perceived as neutral, but instead directly, without explicit reflection, motivate one to act in a certain way. One’s unreflective acts depend on which ways of acting are experienced as possible and motivating in the current environment, that is to say, which *possibilities for action* that environment offers. Rietveld argues that unreflective action should



be understood as one's responding to these possibilities for action, widely referred to as *affordances* in the field of embodied cognition.

It is not only the particular affordance that we are engaged with that we experience as relevant: rather, the world as a whole appears to us as a *field of relevant affordances* – a multitude of possibilities to act that are not merely theoretical and phenomenologically 'empty', but are instead pre-reflectively experienced as more or less bodily potentiating or affectively alluring. Rietveld maintains that unreflective action should be characterized in terms of our responsiveness to this field as a whole, and stresses that the structure of the field – that is, the set of the possibilities for action to which we are sensitive at a certain moment – is determined not only by our current environment and our momentary needs, interests, and preferences, but also by our previous learning and experience.

While the notion of affordance is usually used with regard to motor intentionality, Rietveld expands the original term, introduced by J. J. Gibson, beyond the strictly motor domain, proposing that affordances can include possibilities for action that would require reflection. The act of reflection can be pre-reflectively experienced from within the flow of unreflective action as simply one of the affordances in the field, "one of the various relevant possibilities for action exerting influence on us from the background" (ibid.: 163). Furthermore, Rietveld maintains that in addition to the so-called 'object affordances', the field also includes what he terms 'social affordances': "possibilities for social interaction offered by an environment" (2012: 208).

In accordance with Rietveld's description of unreflective action as "a form of *embodied* intelligence that is 'motivated' by the situation" (2008: 4), we can therefore regard pre-reflective social understanding as a matter of one's adequate responsiveness to various possibilities for (inter)action provided in a particular social situation. As you are sitting opposite your smiling friend in the bar, her annoyed-yet-willing-to-listen expression affords you to smile back, showing that you have acknowledged her expression, and to continue with your speech. Your appropriate response to this possibility for action manifests that you have understood the situation, and can thus be described as a kind of embodied intelligence. Notably, there are other affordances that you might experience as relevant and respond to instead, for instance the possibilities of

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feeling ashamed and looking down, shouting an angry “What are you smiling at?” or resorting to explicit reflection on your friend’s mental states in trying to figure out how she feels and what she thinks about you. In any of these cases, your understanding of your friend and the subsequent unfolding of the interaction would be different – the reason that you unreflectively respond to the possibility to smile in apology and keep talking is found in the structure of your current field of affordances. As I have argued, the set of affordances we experience as relevant in a social encounter with a familiar other depends in part on our history of interactions, mediated through the memory of the lived body. Another crucial element in its determination – related to the shared embodied past, but nevertheless more than only a passive experiential correlate of intercorporeal memory – is the feeling of familiarity.

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### 2.3 The influence of ‘feeling familiar’ on social interaction and understanding

It is perhaps almost self-evident that the first-person experience of a particular social encounter as familiar usually coincides with the condition in which, as Fuchs and De Jaegher describe it from the third-person perspective, “the history of coordination [has demarcated] the interaction as an identifiable pattern with its own internal structure” (2009: 471). Certainly, repeated interaction with someone – playing table tennis, being intimate or discussing personal problems – over time not only becomes more coordinated, but also comes to be experienced with increased degrees of familiarity. In this way, the feeling of familiarity is commonly understood as a *passive* experience, somehow secondary to the interactional process: we experience interacting with the other as familiar *because* the patterns of our interaction have become structured over time.

Although it often goes hand in hand with historically established patterns of interaction with a well-known other, I suggest that the feeling of familiarity is not their mere phenomenological counterpart, but instead actively guides the unfolding of a particular interaction episode. The proponents of the situated approach to emotions (Griffiths and Scarantino 2009) maintain a similar view

for affective states more generally, arguing that while an individual's emotions are, without doubt, shaped by the course of a particular emotional episode, they in turn causally contribute to its development. Rather than being only passive signals of the significance of environmental stimuli, emotions are dynamically coupled to their social environment and can modify one's social context. Colombetti and Krueger (2015) further suggest that the way in which our affective states, with or without our conscious intention to do so, manipulate the (social) environment, can result in the establishment of what they term *affective niches*, "instances of organism-environment couplings (mutual influences) that enable the realization of specific affective states" (ibid.: 4).

Being thus coupled to the social situation, the feeling of familiarity in a way supports its own continuity. While our feeling familiar with another person can emerge from the shared history of interaction, we might in turn already enter every new particular face-to-face encounter with this person with a background feeling of familiarity that will influence how we grasp them from the very beginning. Therefore, the feeling of familiarity can, in a way, precede the interaction rather than only secondarily emerge from its structure: we can feel familiar with someone even in the absence of the interactional process. What matters is that we experience the relationship with this person – either in their physical presence or through imagination – as *providing us with certain possibilities to act*: we pre-reflectively *know that we can* address them with a certain utterance, look or touch them in a certain way, etc. Actively structuring how we experience the possibilities of the social situation, the feeling of familiarity shapes the ways in which we unreflectively (inter)act and might contribute to the stability of our cognitive grasp and affective relation to the other over time.

Although this hypothesis certainly requires further investigation, I believe that the feeling of familiarity could encompass a certain affordance structure of our experience of (interacting with) the other, in which the possibility of reflection (on how to interact), described above as one of the affordances in unreflective action, is experienced as less relevant. While being more sensitive to various established possibilities to (inter)act with the familiar other with the pre-reflective confidence that we can do so, we might be less likely to feel the (however marginally experienced) need to step out of the flow of unreflective

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interaction with them and reflect upon their mental states and other kinds of reasons, or deliberate about our own ongoing or future actions. Such disposition to let ourselves be bound by the ongoing interactional exchange might be characteristic of encounters in which we experience the other as more transparent, available and connected to us.<sup>6</sup> As Schutz explains, “the greater my awareness of the We-relationship, the less my involvement in it, and the less I am genuinely related to my partner. The more I reflect, the more my partner becomes transformed into a mere object of thought” (1967: 167). Furthermore, the distinctive openness towards the possibilities of interacting with the familiar other, which we might already bring into a particular social encounter, will importantly influence the ways in which we will feel and understand them.

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Colombetti and Krueger (2015) explain that in relationships with a previous history of interaction people come to implicitly expect how the other will respond and how that in turn will influence their own responses and related affectivity. Over time, people in such relationships “develop habitual patterns of affective responsiveness to one another”. The authors argue that thus acquired “pre-reflective patterns of reliance” (ibid.: 11) are the foundations of the affective feelings of trust and familiarity: we feel familiar when interacting with certain people because they act in a way which we have already pre-reflectively expected. I agree that the experience of (pre-reflective) expectations being fulfilled is a crucial characteristic of social interactions in which we feel familiar. However, I suggest that this experience might not only come from the perceived acts perfectly matching our already existing expectations. Instead, I believe that when we feel familiar with someone in the first place, the background sense of trust that we (can) know the other person shapes the way in which we anticipate their responses: in letting ourselves be

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<sup>6</sup> As has been emphasized above, the feeling of familiarity in the presented analysis does *not* necessarily have a *positive* emotional valence: it is a background orientation *through which* the interaction or the other person can come to be experienced as either pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant. On a similar note, one’s openness to be unreflectively bound to the well-established dynamics of interaction does not only characterize harmonious and pleasant social encounters. There are many instances of conflicting social interactions marked by a feeling of familiarity, in which participants let themselves be drawn to destructive or unpleasantly experienced possibilities to act.

bound to the ongoing interaction, we are more likely to perceive the acts of the other as *already-having-been-expected*. While the agreement of the other's acts with historically structured and reliable patterns of interaction certainly contributes to your experience of them as having-been-expected (you might, for instance, soon stop feeling familiar with your friend in the bar episode if she reacts to your loud tone with an awkward stare she has never expressed before), the feeling of familiarity itself feeds back into the interaction by enabling you to directly experience these very patterns as 'reliable'. Even though your understanding of your friend's smile as annoyed-yet-willing-to-listen might be false, feeling familiar with her supports your trust in its correctness and contributes to guiding your unreflective actions accordingly. This feeling familiar with the other can thus also be present in cases in which we in fact *misunderstand* their (explicit) reasons for acting.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout this paper, I have been describing pre-reflective social understanding in face-to-face encounters as a form of non-conceptual, practical intelligence that emerges from the coordination of the participants' behavior and meaning in embodied interaction. The first part of the paper examined how understanding of the other is supported by the shared social environment, while the second has focused on the ways in which it is shaped by our history of interactions. Suggesting that pre-reflective social understanding is a matter of one's appropriate responsiveness to the possibilities for (inter) action in a social situation, I have examined two crucial elements that influence

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7 By arguing that the feeling of familiarity is an active component of social understanding, I am thus not making any claims with regard to the correctness of such understanding – described as the ability to appropriately respond to current possibilities for (inter)action, pre-reflective social understanding clearly does not refer to the other's explicit reasons to act (if at all present) and is therefore not to be judged in terms of being explicitly true or false with regard to them. However, it is possible that the feeling of familiarity contributes to the formation of more propositional, true or false, knowledge of the other's reasons to act or their general beliefs or feelings. Two people can, for instance, be involved in a relationship of mutual *misunderstanding* and nevertheless 'falsely' feel that they understand each other, possibly uncovering the discrepancy only after having verbally exposed each other's explicit reasons for action. In such a case it is exactly the feeling of the other as familiar that allows both participants to experience the acts of the other as having-been-expected, enabling them to feel that they understand each other and interact without reflection.

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the set of possibilities experienced as relevant in social interaction with a well-known other: intercorporeal memory and the feeling of familiarity. I have conceptualized the feeling of familiarity as an existential feeling, describing it as a subtle background orientation towards the social situation that does not necessarily only result from established patterns of interaction, but can itself actively structure the ways in which we understand the other and interact with them. By providing us with the basic trust that we know and (can) understand the other, the feeling of familiarity might shape our social understanding in a way in which we are less inclined to reflect upon the ongoing interaction and more disposed to experience the acts of the familiar other as already-having-been-expected, and could therefore support the stability and continuity of our experience of the other. Thus, it might in a way reinforce itself: we experience the interaction with the other as familiar in part because we have felt familiar with them in the past.

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