BALES INTERACTION PROCESS ANALYSIS

The purpose of the Bales Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) system is to identify and record the nature (not the content) of each separate act in ongoing group interaction. The following information describes how to use the IPA system.

The Unit to be Scored

In attempting to use the IPA system, the first issue is to learn to identify a “unit” of interaction. The basic definition developed by Bales is that of a single simple sentence or its equivalent.

The unit to be scored is the single “act.” An act is a communication or an indication, either verbal or nonverbal, which, in its context, may be understood by another member as equivalent to a single simple sentence. In grammatical definition as to what constitutes a simple sentence, a variety of types are recognized. Sentences may be declarative, interrogative, imperative, or exclamatory. The simple sentence contains, or at least implies, a subject (that which is spoke of) and a predicate (what is said about the subject), thus presenting a complete thought to which the person addressed may make a reasonable reply or reaction. An act may be defined as a communication or interaction sufficiently complete to permit the other person to interpret it, and so react in relation to its content and to the speaker. This is a definition in terms of interpersonal relations rather than of grammar, and although vaguer, is probably preferable because it is broader. Unfortunately, it also is more dependent on the interpretation of the observer. The grammatical conception of the simple sentence will help the observer, but should not be taken the final criterion.

Fragments of sentences, words, or phrases are scored as communication acts (units), when one can understand the meaning of as a unit of thought in context. Ordinarily, the observer can transform fragmentary communication or indications into a form complete enough to permit classification according to the set of categories used. If a member say, “What?,” The observer might translate, according to the context, “What was that?,” “I do not understand you,” “I disbelieve you,” or “Would you repeat that?” in such a way as to represent the interpersonal meaning in the interactive context. The observer, thus, fills out both subject and predicate, and, consequently, interprets the meaning more fully than the original question suggests. These remarks are not meant to indicate that the observer literally phrases all fragmentary communication into complete sentences but, rather, that in the normal process of categorizing, the observer makes interpretations that could be represented in this way. For example, “Me?” may mean, “Were you referring to me?” Such scraps of conversation as “Huh” and “Mm” may have fairly clear meaning in context. Also included are nonverbal acts, when a message clearly is implied. For example, a nod of the head may clearly signify agreement, and shaking the head may, in context, mean disagreement or even an unfriendly reaction.

Having a set of categories in mind, the observer listens and watches for the smallest items or segments of behavior that will enable him/her to make a score in one of the categories of the IPA system. The observer cuts the process up into the smallest classifiable pieces. The nature of the categories determines how small the pieces may be. The set of categories used with the
present system is geared to complete units of meaningful communication of the size best exemplified by the single simple sentence.

Complex sentences (as distinguished from simple sentences) always involve more than one score. Each dependent clause may receive a separate score if it expresses an additional complete thought. If a series of predicates are given in relation to a single subject, a separate score may be given for each additional predicate on the reasoning that each one constitutes a new item of information or opinion that might provoke a new or different reaction from the listener. Compound sentences joined by “and,” “but,” and so forth, are broken down into their component simple parts, each of which is given a score. As an example, the following sentence would be analyzed into four units (the end of each unit is indicated by a slash): “This problem that we talked about for 3 hours yesterday/impresses me as a very complicated/, difficult/, and perhaps beyond our power to solve/.” It is debatable whether each of the last two units really adds a new item of information, but the dilemma is resolved in favor of additional units anyway. The observer maintains a bias in favor of more rather than fewer units. The scores, thus, may come a little closer to approximating the time consumed, and will appropriately reflect the emphasis desired by the speaker if he/she does repeat.

In addition to speech centered around the issue being discussed, interaction includes facial expressions, gestures, bodily attitudes, emotional signs, or nonverbal acts of various kinds, either expressive and nonfocal or more definitely directed toward other people. These expressions and gestures can be detected by the observer, given an interpretation in terms of the categories, and recorded. The observer should remain as alert as possible, keeping his/her eyes on the group constantly. The observer should canvass the separate members for unobtrusive expressive reactions at every opportunity—any slight pause may give an opportunity—but the search should be as nearly constant as the observer can make it. Silent indications of attitudes and feelings, such as boredom, withdrawal, and disapproval, may not break up naturally into units. A score should be put down as soon as the observer notes the attitude. Therefore, each time there is an increase in its intensity, or any new or renewed sign of it, another score should be entered. If close attention is paid, the observer probably will obtain a sufficient number of scores, since, in many instances, there is a hidden intention to communicate the feeling, and the member will keep finding new ways to place his/her feelings in evidence.

Bales Category Descriptions

The second problem to be surmounted is to become familiar with Bales’s categories of interaction. Some of the categories are fairly easy to describe, understand, and recognize; others are more complex and more difficult to comprehend and identify.

1. **Seems Friendly:** Any act showing hospitality, being neighborly, expressing sympathy, or similarity of feeling; indicates of being attracted, demonstrations of affection; urging of unity or harmony; expressing of desire for cooperation or solidarity; showing a protective or nurturing attitude; praising, rewarding, approving, or encouraging others; sustaining or reassuring a person having difficulty; complementing or congratulating; exchanging, trading, or lending objects (e.g., a pen); confiding in another; expressing gratitude or appreciation, surrendering or giving into another (e.g., when interrupted); friendly
submission so that another can go ahead; confessions of ignorance; acts of apology, grinning
with pleasure, smiling directly at another. Offering to undertake a job on behalf of others
because one has the power or resources to do it, and, in this paternalistic manner, offering
services, assistance, time, energy, money, or another other resource would fall under this
category.

2. **Dramatizes**: Any act that emphasizes the hidden meaning or emotional implications or is
especially self-revealing about a person. Most frequently, these are jokes or stories with a
double meaning. They may take the form of an anecdote about a particular person in which
emotional feelings are expressed, or they may be symbolic actions—shrugs or bodily and
facial expressions portraying great amazement, surprise, fear, or anger. More than one
meaning is nearly always implicit in dramatizations as here defined; for example, a
posturing, facial expression, remark, or all three together may imply: (a) “He certainly
thinks he is something!” and (2) “I don’t agree.” The personal tone of this dramatic bit,
coupled with the overtones of partially hidden emotional feelings, are typical of acts scored
in this category. According to Bales, “The joke is a very common form of dramatization in
group interaction. The joker expects, though perhaps not always too clearly, to produce a
shock of recognition of the hidden meaning, to provoke a laugh, a sudden release or display
of tension.” Bales went on to suggest that the concept the joker offers if loaded but that
whoever laughs admits “the hidden truth.” The essential quality of this category is that of
some special, personal, partially hidden meaning subtly exposed in a way that is emotionally
releasing even though risky; thus, one ordinary hallmark of such acts is that they seem to
have two meanings, one dangerous to expose and the other somewhat amusing on the
surface. Behavior such as this may seem to be dangerous or better avoided; however, Bales
makes this evaluative comment: “In terms of psychological services performed, and general
importance in the group as well as individual life, these activities are not task-oriented, but
they are nevertheless serious psychological business.”

The attitude may, of course, by light-hearted. Expressions of feeling better after a period of
tension, any manifestation of cheerfulness, buoyancy, satisfaction, gratification,
contentment, enjoyment, relish, zest, enthusiasm, pleasure, delight, joy, or happiness; any
indication that the member is thrilled, elated, euphoric, or the like, may act as a tension-
releaser for others, and, thus, are properly classed in this category.

3. **Agrees**: Any act that shows accord, concurrence, or assent about facts, inferences, or
hypotheses.

The minor forms include giving specific signs of attention to what another is saying as
he/she goes along, as a means of encouraging him/her to say what he/she wishes, by nodding
the heading, saying “I see,” “Yes,” or “m-hmn”; completing what the other is trying to say
by adding a word he/she searches for or is hesitant to say, or otherwise aiding and
facilitating communication. Other minor forms include showing comprehension,
understanding, or insight, after a period of puzzlement (e.g., “Oh!,” “I see,” and “Yes).

The more substantial forms of agreement have a more binding or contractual implication—
they are given as if meant to commit the agreeing member to the substantial content of what
has been said, and as if they might be relied on later. The agreement may be about information, opinion, or suggestion. It may express confirmation, conviction, accord, concurrence, assent about factors, inferences, and hypotheses. Examples include: “That the way I see it too”; “I think you are right about that”; “I think you are right about that”; “Yes, that’s true”; and “Precisely.” Similarly, the category includes approval or endorsement of expressions of value, feeling or sentiment; for example, “I feel the same way you do,” “I hope so too,” “Those are my sentiments exactly,” and “That’s right.” Nonverbal agreement may involve nodding the head, showing special interest, or giving significant visible attention to what is being said.

4. Gives Suggestions: Any act that takes the lead in the task direction. This category includes routine control of communication and directing the attention of the group to task problems when they have been agreed on by the group. Thus, mentioning a problem to be discussed, pointing out the relevance of a remark, calling a meeting to order, referring to the agenda, and opening a new phase of activity—all of these are scored in this category if they are routine, agreed-on moves and if they are brought forth in a way that implies the acceptability of dissent if anyone so desires.

For example, “Watch closely now” and “Next I want to call your attention to . . . .” Calling a meeting to order, referring back to an agenda, the giving of any routine signal if one is beginning a new phase of activity or a new focus of effort, signifying the end of a phase of activity or pronouncing the meeting adjourned; these are clear instances of procedural (rather than substantive) suggestions.

In general, direct attempts to guide or counsel, or prepare another member for some activity, to prevail upon him/her, to persuade him/her, exhort the person, urge, enjoin, or inspire him/her to some action, by dependence on authority or ascendance rather than by logical inference are examples of this category. In the present system, however, suggestions must be neutral; that is, neither negative nor positive in feeling to be classified in this category. A suggestion should be scored in the category “Seems Unfriendly” if any negative feeling is detectable. Similarity, it should be scored under “Seems Friendly” if any appreciable positive feeling is present. This scoring is meant to make categories 1 and 12 more sensitive, and to leave in “Gives Suggestions: category only those suggestions that maintain a strictly neutral feeling.

5. Gives Opinion: Category 5 is the workhorse of all the interaction categories. It is the category more frequently used in many observation situation, and it includes many of those types of acts by which the group gets its “work” done—its problem solving, decision making, and legislative and administrative work. The present category is intended to include only acts that have strictly neutral, serious, and objective implications. The types of action that seem most congruent with this category are statements of moral obligation; affirmations of major beliefs or values; statements of policy, intention, guiding principle, or law; and reference to a broad and indefinite future time perspective, as yet unimplemented as to ways and means. Examples include: “I wish we could fix it so that . . . .”; “I think we ought to be fair about this . . . .”; “I hope we can do something about that . . . .”; “It seems right to me that .
This category also includes any act that involves a moral obligation, offers a major belief or value, or indicates adherence to a policy or guiding principle. Such acts should be serious but not personal, sincere but objective. “Gives Opinions” includes expressions of understanding or insight besides those of value judgments, such as: “I believe I see your point,” “I think we should recognize our obligation to . . .,” or “I feel we are on the right track.” If such an act is not serious or is insincere, it should be scored in category 2, “Dramatizes.” Category 5, “Gives Opinions,” should be distinguished by category 6, “Gives Information,” primarily on the basis of its use of inference or value judgment.

6. **Gives Information**: Any act reporting factual (not necessarily true) or potentially verifiable (testable) observations or experiences. Probably the clearest cases of giving information are statements that are recognized as generally established or easily confirmed by observation. Common cases of giving information are reports on problem situations confronting the group, such as: “The legislature has not yet acted on that bill,” “They usually have coffee for us just down the hall,” “The phone is out of operation,” “The number is 868-7600,” “It would take 3 days to reach her by mail,” “They pick up the mail at 5:30,” and “We only have 2 days left.” These statements essentially are objective, noninferential, not much emotionally toned, not vague, and are, in principle, testable.

Information often is given gratuitously, and at length, as in a lecture, or in the process of conveying knowledge in a context where the implication is that the other person wants to know something the speaker can tell him/her. The expectation is that the information given will be accepted, if understood. It is not offered as if it were problematic, or a matter of decision, although, in fact, many acts of giving information are disagreed with. In giving opinion, the expectation usually is less optimistic—a greater amount of disagreement is expected than in the case of giving information, and the expectation usually is justified. Any statement too vague in principle to be tested is not classified as “Gives Information” but, usually, as “Gives Opinion.”

7. **Asks for Information**: Questions requesting a factual, descriptive, objective type of answer, an answer based on experience, observation, or empirical research. If such a type of answer is impossible, in that it requires guessing, supposing, looking forward in time to events that have not yet occurred, or the like, the question should be classified as “Asks for Opinion” rather than “Asks for Information.” The questions can be about the situation or task facing the group, about the group itself (e.g., its structure or organization), about another person, about one’s self, or about what has been said or done in the process of communication currently going on. The question may be direct (e.g., “What day of the month is it?,” “Who is in charge of the arrangements for the next meeting?,” or “What did you say?”) or indirect (e.g., if, in the course of a description, a person says, “I’m not sure of the exact date,” this may be considered an indirect or implied question; “I have forgotten whom we appointed”; or “I didn’t hear you”). Any routine request for repetition properly is classified as asking for information.
This category is meant to include primarily those questions that require the giving of a rather simple factual answer rather than an evaluation, an inference, or the expression of a feeling. To ask for information is to ask for an answer that can be judged as true or false on the basis of simple observation (although not necessarily possible at the moment), or an answer that generally is regarded as an empirical fact, and is likely to be accepted as nonproblematic, once given and understood).

8. **Asks for Opinions**: Any act that seeks an inferential interpretation, a statement involving beliefs or attitudes, a value judgment, or a report of one’s understanding or insight. It may include a request for diagnosis of a situation or a reaction to an idea.

This category includes any type of question that attempts to encourage a statement of reaction on the part of another person without limiting the nature of the response, except in a very general way, with the implication that the other person has freedom to express interest or disinterest, where he/she is not put under pressure to agree or disagree, to come out with any predetermined answer, type of answer, or attitude.

A warding should be given here regarding questions such as, “Do you know what I mean” and “Do you see?” These are examples of attempts to elicit agreement and should be identified as persuasive effort, properly coded in category 4, “Gives Suggestions.”

Another problem occurs when an elected leader serves the group in ways the other members have commissions/him/her to, and he/she is struggles to understand and comply with, their wishes. In such a case, the leader might ask for an opinion in this manner: “Would you like to have a committee work on that?” If, however, the leader asks, “What should we do about increasing our membership,” the leader is asking for suggestions regarding ways of solving a group problem and, consequently, this type of question should be identified in category 9, “Asks for Suggestions.”

9. **Asks for Suggestions**: Any act that requests guidance in the problem-solving process, is neutral in emotional tone, and attempts to turn the initiative over to another. Often such acts also indicate a feeling of confusion or uncertainty about the position of the group with regard to its goals, the course of discussion to the present point, or about what has been said or is going on (e.g., “Where are we?” “Where do we stand now?” and “I don’t know what to do”). To fit this category properly, the request should be “open ended,” without the implication of any specific answer (e.g., “What do you think we should do about that?”). If, however, the question is asked in such a way that a specific answer is implied, it should be coded in category 4, “Gives Suggestions” (an example of a veiled suggestion is, “I wonder if there are any other ways of getting information from the legislature?” as it seems to imply there are other ways and suggests that they be considered).

10. **Disagrees**: Any initial act in a sequence that rejects another person’s statement of information, opinion, or suggestion. It is a reaction to another’s action as defined by Bales: “The negative feeling conveyed is attached to the content of what the other has said, not to him [her] as a person. And the negative feeling must not be very strong, or the act will seem unfriendly.” (It would, in such a case, be scored in category 122, “Seems Unfriendly.”)
Statements that follow the initial rejection of another’s position, such as arguments, rebuttals, and questions (e.g., “I don’t think so” and “I don’t think that’s right”), are not scored as disagreement; instead, they are scored in other categories.

11. **Shows Tension**: Any act that exhibits conflict between submission and nonconformity, yet does not clearly show negative feeling toward another person. Several varieties of acts are scored in this category, not all of which seem similar on a superficial level. Laughter, in particular, may seem quite different from signs of anxious emotionality.

Signs of anxious emotionality indicate a conflict between acting and withholding action. Minor outbreaks of reactive anxiety first may be mentioned, such as appearing startled, disconcerted, flurry, fluster, confusion, trembling, blushing, clicking a pen, flushing, stammering, sweating, gulping, swallowing, or wetting the lips persistently also may be included.

There are various types of conflict. Sometimes fear of disapproval conflicts with instinctual or impulsive desires. Sometimes the tendency to conform to one set of values or authoritative demands conflicts with another set of values or authoritative demands. The person in conflict may suppress, conceal, hide, or fail to mention something that is considered discreditable, such as ineptitude, ignorance, a defect, a misdeed, or a humiliating trait or event. Indications of holding back in this way are scored as showing tension.

Of special import in this category is laughter. On the surface, laughter may seem to indicate a reduction of tension, and it may, in part, serve that purpose. In fact, however, it appears to be more dependable as a sign of tension rather than a sign of its reduction. We are not speaking here of friendly smiles with a relaxed atmosphere of interpersonal warmth; rather, we are identifying embarrassed or tense laughter.

Laughter seems to be a sudden escape into motor discharge of conflicted emotional states that not longer can be contained. The emotions may be anxiety, aggression, affection, or any other. Laughter is a momentary breaking of a state of tension, and if continued, it may help to reduce the general state of tension, but it equally is appropriate to treat it as a sign of tension.

An additional behavior to be included in this category is any embarrassed reaction to disapproval, as in the appearance of being chagrined, chastised, or mortified. Showing tension more generally includes any verbal or motor expressions of fear, apprehension, worry, dread, fright, terror, or panic.

12. **Seems Unfriendly**: Any act that is personally negative; it is not content orientation, which would be classified as “Disagrees” when negative, but is oriented toward another person.

The name of this category is chosen so as to require only very slight signs of negative feeling to justify a classification of seeming unfriendly. The word “seems” is meant to put the matter on a subjective basis, and the word “unfriendly” is meant to sound very weak and unemotional compared with some of the acts that are scored in this category. Thus, the signs
may be very minimal, and the negative feeling very slight. The cutoff point for admission of an act to this category is deliberately placed very low, because in most interactions, the rate in this category will be low anyway, and it seems best to err on the side of inclusion when in doubt.

Conspicuous attempts to override the other in conversation, interrupting the other, interfering with his/her speaking, gratuitously finishing his/her sentence when he/she does now want help, insisting on finishing, or warding off interruption all are comparatively mild examples of seeming unfriendly.

There are a number of varieties of attacks of deflation of the other’s status, ranging from mild to violent. Any implication of inferiority or incompetence on the part of the other is included. Appraising the other contemptuously, belittling him/her, depreciating, disparaging, ridiculing, or minimizing the other, reducing his/her remarks to absurdity, and making fun of him/her, as included. More extreme acts that could be described as maliciously sarcastic, satirical, or ironical, in which the person lampoons, caricatures, burlesques the other, or becomes unduly and insultingly familiar are included. Teaching, taunting, heckling, gloating, jeering, scoffing, mocking, sneering, bedeviling, goading, baiting, or provoking the other to say something indiscreet or damaging are included. Damning the other, finding fault with him/her, complaining, criticizing; any act that is abusive, accusatory, or acrimonious is included. Making charges against the other, imputing unworthy motives to him/her, blaming the person, denouncing him/her, berating, ill-treating, or browbeating the other all are, of course, included. The category includes any act of gossip, libel, slander; smirching of the other’s character, branding him/her with undesirable characteristics, demeaning him/her, exposing him/her, or undermining his/her position; maligning or discrediting the person and placing him/her at a disadvantage. Other similar acts include tricking, hoaxing, duping, deceiving, fleecing, hazing, humiliating the other, or rendering him conspicuous.

A good many acts in which the person works against authority or persons in authority are included: showing nonsubmissiveness in the face of authority; nonconformity or excessive independence; acts that from the point of view of the person in authority are seen as disobedient, insubordinate, rebellious, irresponsible, willful, obstreperous, unrestrained, disorderly, harping, griping, nagging, badgering, harassing, annoying, perturbing, disturbing, or pestering. In the same category are acts that seem disrespectful, discourteous, impudent, bold, saucy, flippant, and attitudes that seem impervious, unashamed, or unrepentant.

This category also includes acts in which there is an attempt to control, regulate, govern, direct, or supervise in a manner that seems arbitrary and in which the freedom of choice or consent of the other person is either greatly limited or nonexistent, with the implication that he/she has not right to protest or modify the demand, but is expected to follow the directive immediately without argument. The category includes arbitrarily assigning a role, locating or relocating the other, defining or restricting his/her powers of fiat, making demands or giving commands, such as “Come here!” “Stop that!” “Hurry up,” and “Get out!” Any act in which the person peremptorily beckons, points, pushes, pulls, or otherwise directly controls, or attempts to control the activity of the other may be included (unless, of course, it is routine and, thus, neutral).
Intervention in an argument or conflict with arbitrary attempts to judge or settle it or to render a decision is included in this category. The moralistic legalistic aspects of the relevant behavior also are shown in disapproval, including acts ranging from mild forms, such as reprimanding the other, blaming him/her, scolding him/her, admonishing or reminding the person of his/her duty, to more extreme forms, such as indications that one is shocked, indignant, appalled, scandalized at something the other has done, and shows horror or disgust. Indications that one is indignant, offended, or insulted about a personal affront are included. Indications of a more generalized moral indignation, such as a grim expression, appearing incensed, irate, outraged, or infuriated by some deviance of the other are included. Paying attention to something other than the activity with which the group is concerned, when there is an expectation that all members will be attending or actively participating, is included. Speaking or paying attention to outsiders, such as observers, when the group as a whole is working on another problem is included. All undetermined member-to-member contacts; that is, asides, whispering, winks, and so forth, as the main discussion is going on between others may indicate rejections by both participants of the rest of the group.

Passive refusals to act that frustrate the other may be included; acts in which one thwarts, balks, blocks, obstructs, or puts barriers in the way of the other, confines, constrains, or stands in his/her way, or renders his/her efforts vain, upsets his/her plans, forestalls, contravenes, foils, or checkmates him/her. This category also includes acts of withholding resources from other members, the manifestation of possessive, retentive, retractile, or secretive attitudes. Any act in which the person disappoints the other, refuses to let the other participate, or have access to some resource may be included here.

Actions or the display of attitudes that indicate that the person is inattentive, bored, or psychologically withdrawn from others and from the problem at hand are included, such as slouching, yawning, closing the eyes, daydreaming, looking away from others in the group, looking away from the work, and letting the eyes wander. Attitudes that seem listless, languid, bemused, absorbed, abstracted, or oblivious to others are scored in this category as well. More definite and overt acts of withdrawal, such as retiring, leaving, quitting, resigning, deserting, or retreating from humiliation also are included. More extreme forms of autistic, subjective, or socially irrelevant behavior that indicate a lack of contact with what is going on may be included, such as talking to oneself or mumbling. Refusing to talk loud enough to be heard also is scored in this category.

Summary of Priority Rules for Scoring

By way of summary, it may be helpful to collect and present the various rules for deciding which category is to have priority in cases of conflict as to where an act should be scored. Generally, a given act is to be placed in one and only one category.

1. Give priority to a scoring in category 2, “Dramatizes,” or category 11, “Shows Tension,” over a scoring in any other category. This rule is particularly relevant to acts that otherwise would be placed in category 6, “Gives Information.”
2. Give priority to a scoring in category 1, “Seems Friendly,” or in category 12, “Seems Unfriendly,” if an element of interpersonal feeling is present. This rule is particularly relevant to acts that otherwise would be categorized as giving opinion and giving suggestion. Simple acts of agreement and disagreement are exempt from this rule.


4. After an initial act of disagreement, or of agreement, the scoring reverts to the neutral categories based on the interaction form of the act, such as “Gives Opinion,” “Gives Information,” and “Gives Suggestion.”

The general effect of these rules is to divert the classification of acts that tend to be most frequent, in the form of giving opinion and information, into less frequently used categories that depend on more subtle cues and are of greater diagnostic interest.