

Psychodynamic Theory Isn't the Problem. Measurement Is.



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Psychodynamic ideas have never failed because they were vague, mystical, or clinically indulgent. They failed—temporarily—because the field didn't yet know how to measure what they were actually describing.

Long before contemporary debates about traits, severity, and mechanisms, Timothy Leary made a radical claim: **personality is not what people have, but what they do to other people—repeatedly, under conditions of anxiety.** In *Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality*, he argued that personality is best understood as a *functional system* of interpersonal operations aimed at preserving self-esteem and warding off threat.

Interpersonal Diagnosis of
PERSONALITY

*A Functional Theory and Methodology
for Personality Evaluation*

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This was not metaphor. It was a measurement proposal.

Leary's project was explicitly empirical. He insisted that interpersonal behavior—overt actions, self-descriptions, fantasies, omissions—could be classified, quantified, and tracked across time and levels. Neurosis, in his view, was not a trait constellation but the **compulsive narrowing of interpersonal options**, the rigid reuse of the same anxiety-management strategies even when they reliably fail.

That insight never went away. What went away was the technology.

The Field Chose Description Over Process

Modern personality models, including the DSM-5 Alternative Model for Personality Disorders (AMPD), have advanced diagnostic clarity. Criterion A distinguishes severity of impairment from stylistic traits. Criterion B organizes maladaptive tendencies dimensionally. This matters.

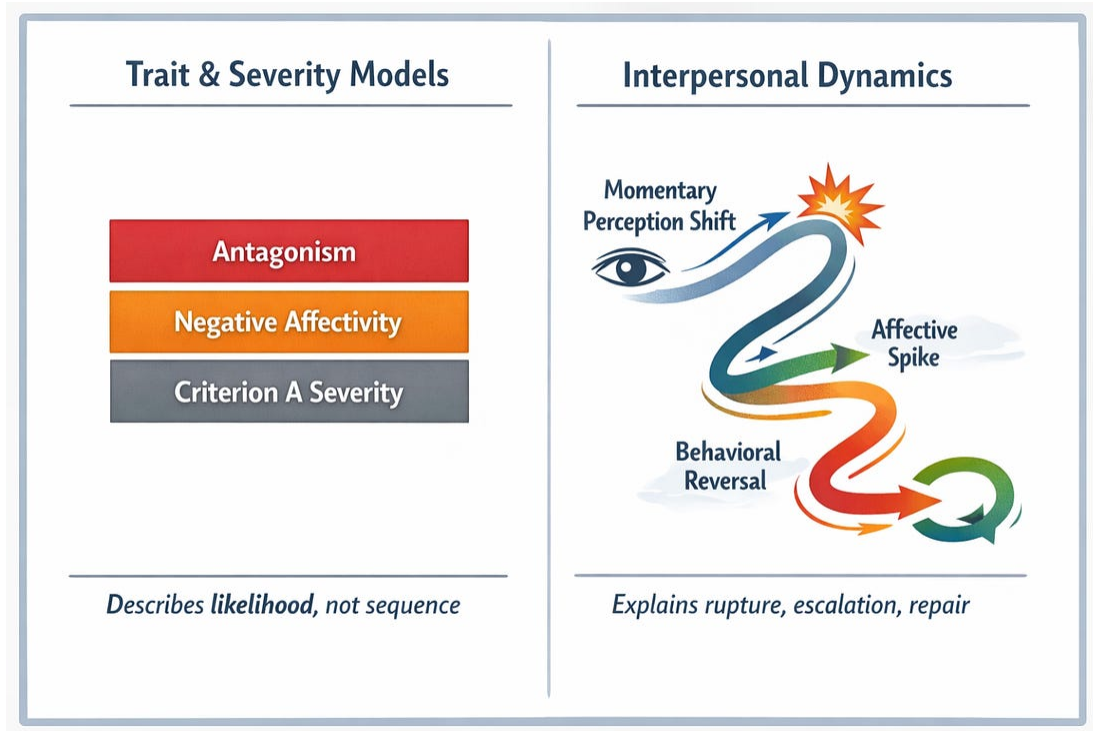
But the AMPD still largely answers a *static* question:

How impaired is this person, and what are they like on average?

Leary—and later Sullivan—were asking something more dangerous:

What interpersonal moves does this person make when anxiety spikes, and how do those moves shape what happens next?

Traits describe probability. Severity describes scope. Neither explains *sequence*.



When a patient flips from warmth to contempt, or from engagement to disappearance, the problem is not that we lack labels. The problem is that we lack a system for tracking **interpersonal motion**.

CIIT Didn't Invent This Problem. It Solves One Leary Identified.

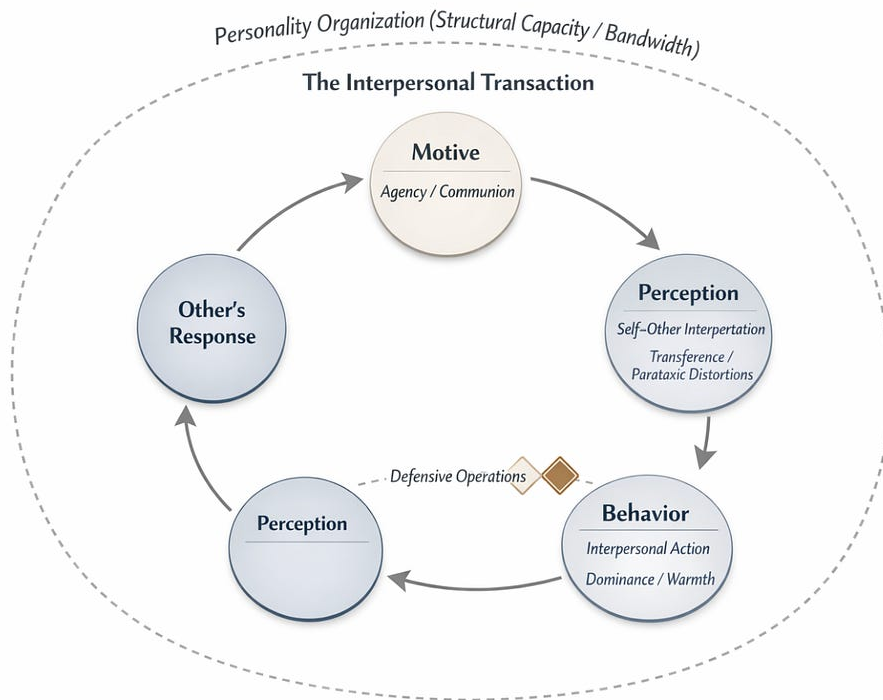
Contemporary Integrative Interpersonal Theory (CIIT) doesn't replace Leary's vision—it fulfills it.

Leary argued that personality must be understood across **levels** (public behavior, conscious self-description, private symbolism) and **variability** (how rigid or flexible interpersonal responses are). He even proposed early variability indices to capture oscillation and discrepancy across contexts .

What he did not have was a way to observe interpersonal behavior *continuously*.

CIIT supplies that missing piece.

By treating the interpersonal transaction—not the individual—as the unit of analysis, CIIT operationalizes what Leary described functionally. Motives, perceptions, affect, and behavior unfold in feedback loops. Patterns stabilize. Variability becomes measurable rather than inferential.

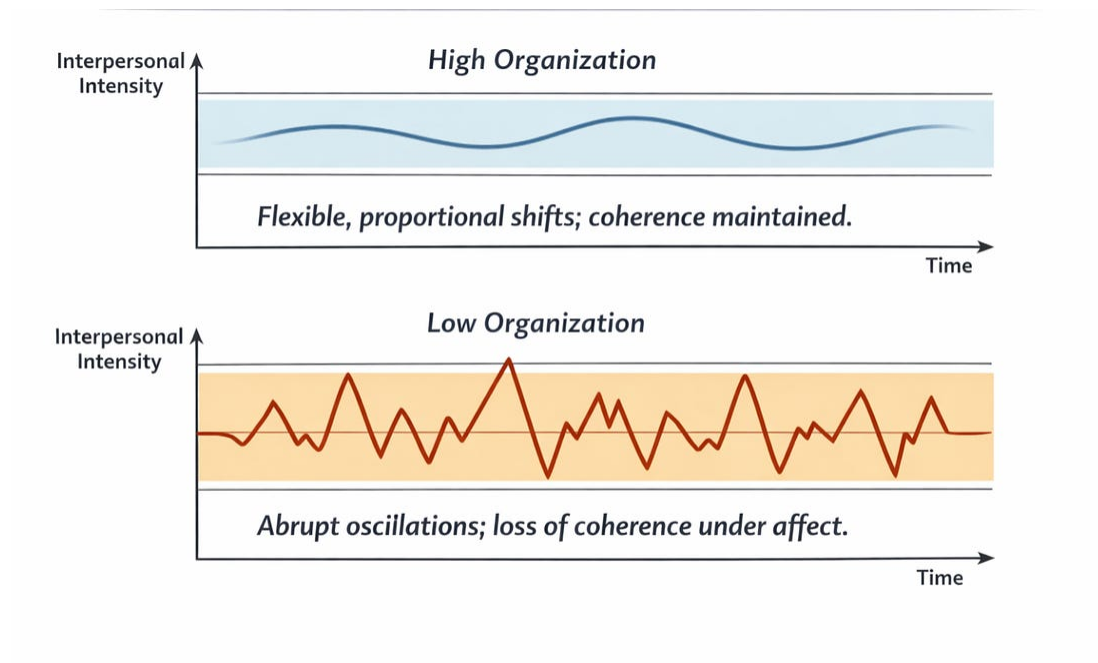


For the first time, psychodynamic constructs can be evaluated not as interpretive overlays, but as **hypotheses about interpersonal dynamics over time**.

Personality Organization as Interpersonal Bandwidth

Leary repeatedly emphasized that maladjustment reflects *restricted interpersonal repertoires*. Healthy functioning involves flexibility—being able to move across interpersonal positions without disintegration. Pathology involves narrowing, rigidity, or chaotic oscillation under threat.

This maps cleanly onto the concept of **personality organization**.



Within CIIT, organization functions as a **structural constraint** on interpersonal variability:

- Higher organization → flexible movement within stable bounds
- Lower organization → extreme shifts, loss of coherence, breakdown of complementarity

If organization is real, it should predict:

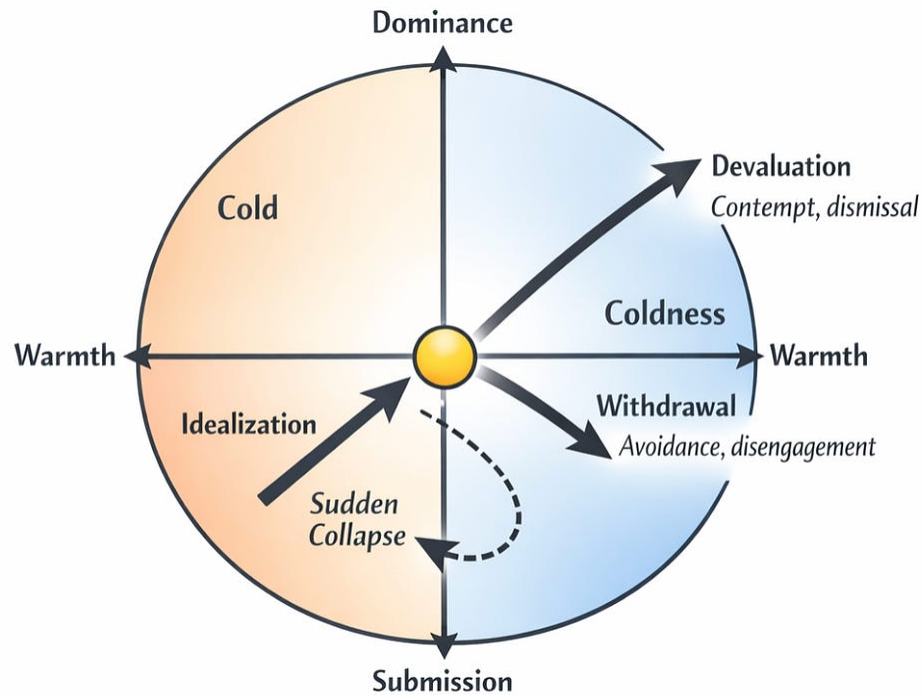
- Greater interpersonal spin and amplitude
- Reduced capacity for coordinated interaction under affective load
- Slower or incomplete rupture–repair cycles

This is exactly the kind of functional validation Leary demanded: constructs earn their status only if they predict *how interpersonal behavior unfolds*, not just that it is impaired.

Defenses as Security Operations in Motion

Leary defined interpersonal behavior as the machinery by which people **reduce anxiety and preserve self-esteem**. That language is unmistakably psychodynamic—and unmistakably interpersonal.

Defenses, in this framework, are not traits or explanations after the fact. They are **moment-to-moment security operations** that redirect affect into action.



Seen this way:

- Devaluation is not hostility—it is an anxiety-management maneuver that pushes behavior toward cold dominance.
- Withdrawal is not passivity—it is a defensive retreat into cold submission.
- Idealization is not warmth—it is a temporary safety strategy that collapses when disappointment threatens self-esteem.

Leary would have recognized these immediately. What CIIT adds is the ability to test them.

If defenses are mechanisms, then independently identified defensive events should **precede specific trajectories through interpersonal space**. If they do not, the theory fails. That is exactly the standard Leary wanted psychodynamic theory to meet.

Why This Matters Clinically

Leary warned that psychiatry becomes distorted when it studies only pathology and ignores function. A science of malfunction, he argued, cannot precede a science of adaptation .

This remains true.

When clinicians rely only on trait language, treatment becomes generic. When interpersonal process is foregrounded, therapy becomes precise.

Instead of asking:

“Why is this patient antagonistic?”

The question becomes:

“What anxiety did this interpersonal move regulate, and what did it cost?”

CIIT turns the therapy room into what Leary always envisioned: a laboratory for observing how personality operates *in real time*.

Psychodynamic Theory Was Always Empirical Enough

The historical irony is that psychodynamic theory did not resist measurement. Measurement resisted psychodynamic complexity.

Leary tried to build a functional, multilevel, interpersonal diagnostic system in the 1950s—with paper checklists and early computing. Sullivan offered process without formalization. CIIT now offers the formal structure and analytic tools they lacked.

The real question is no longer whether psychodynamic constructs are “scientific.”

The question is whether we are finally prepared to evaluate them at the level where they actually live: **interpersonal dynamics under pressure.**
