

The Missing Language of Development II

*Signals, States, and the Interpretive Conditions of Development
Toward a less moralised, functionally precise language for development,
assessment, ethical sequencing, and the conditions of signal-reading*

Foundational note for Horizon Theory and Fieldethics

This note is intended as a foundational starting point rather than a definitive statement.

Abstract

This note identifies a recurring interpretive problem in development work: distinct aspects of inner experience are routinely described through unstable or collapsed language. Signals, states, feelings, perceptions, interpretations, judgements, and forms of authorship are often treated as interchangeable even though they perform different functions. The result is practical as well as conceptual. Self-description becomes less reliable, honesty becomes harder to assess, and institutional records begin carrying assumptions that exceed the behaviour or condition they describe.

Building on Horizon Theory and Fieldethics, this note proposes a working distinction set for reading development more accurately. It does not revise Horizon Theory's dependency chain of regulation, safety, honesty, capacity, responsibility, and outcomes. Rather, it identifies definitional clarity as an interpretive support condition for the accurate enactment of that chain, for the conditions of signal-reading that precede reliable judgement, and for the epistemic reliability required by Fieldethics. By neutral language, this note does not mean value-free language. It means language that is less moralised, less interpretively collapsed, and more functionally precise. The aim is a shared language precise enough to support development, assessment, and interdisciplinary use without collapsing description into moral verdict.

Much work on human difficulty begins after distress, reactivity, avoidance, shame, conflict, or apparent non-compliance are already visible. It then asks which intervention might reduce distress, improve behaviour, or secure an

outcome. A prior question is often missed: what language is available for reading what is happening in the first place?

When the available vocabulary is vague, moralised, or structurally imprecise, the difficulty is not only emotional or behavioural. It is also interpretive. People try to understand themselves through terms that merge different layers of experience and quietly import judgement into description. Someone may call themselves anxious when the more immediate condition is perceptual narrowing; guilty when shame is more operative than conscience; failing when the central issue is overload; or resistant when authorship has narrowed under pressure. These are not merely semantic differences. They change what the person, worker, or system thinks is happening, and therefore what becomes possible next.

The Interpretive Layer Between Signal and Action

Neuroscience can describe mechanisms. Psychology can describe aspects of experience and behaviour. Sociology can describe structure, environment, and power. Systems theory can describe interdependence and feedback. Ethics can describe responsibility, harm, and viability. What remains comparatively under-specified is the interpretive layer between signal and action: the point at which experience is named, meaning is assigned, and description begins shaping development, assessment, and institutional response.

This layer matters because lived experience does not travel into practice or policy directly. It is translated first. Signals become perceptions, perceptions become interpretations, interpretations become self-description, and self-description enters notes, handovers, supervision, assessment, and intervention. When the translation layer is conceptually unstable, distortion scales. For that reason, this layer forms part of the conditions for signal-reading. If the categories used to name signals are unstable, then even sincere self-report and well-intended assessment can become systematically unreliable.

Working Distinctions for Development Language

Signal. A pre-interpretive indication that something requires attention. It may register threat, need, mismatch, attraction, overload, incongruence, or opportunity. A signal is not yet a conclusion.

State. The current configuration of the system through which signals are received and processed. States shape what can be noticed, tolerated, integrated, and enacted. They affect attentional range, honest affordability, behavioural flexibility, and complexity tolerance.

Perception. The system's present reading of what is happening. Perception is shaped by current conditions and prior learning. It therefore carries information, but it is not identical to reality.

Feeling. The consciously accessible felt aspect of a signal or state. Feelings can be informative, but they do not interpret themselves.

Interpretation. The meaning assigned to a signal, feeling, or perception. Interpretation may be careful or careless, explicit or automatic. It is the layer at which description begins to move toward explanation.

Judgement. The evaluative or moral layer added to a signal, state, behaviour, or account. Judgement is often presented as simple description even when it has already moved into verdict.

Authorship. The degree to which action or self-description remains connected to a person's present awareness, values, and actual capacity, rather than being organised primarily by alarm, shame, coercion, or external framing. Reduced authorship does not erase responsibility, but it changes how behaviour should be read.

Why Distorted Categories Disrupt Development

Development depends on a person being able to distinguish what is being detected, what state they are in, what meaning has been assigned, and what remains possible from there. When these layers collapse, shame can be mistaken for truth, alarm for insight, repetition for identity, and pressure-shaped compliance for capacity. A person may then report sincerely yet inaccurately, or act in ways that are misread as character rather than as state-mediated response.

For that reason, distorted categories do more than confuse reflection. They interrupt development. A person cannot work clearly with an inner event that has already been translated into a moral verdict. They may attempt change without having distinguished the conditions that generated the behaviour, or

mistake familiar language for accurate honesty. In that sense, polluted categories can produce sincere but unreliable self-description.

Relation to Horizon Theory and Fieldethics

Horizon Theory identifies a structural dependency chain: REGULATION -> SAFETY -> HONESTY -> CAPACITY -> RESPONSIBILITY -> OUTCOMES. This note does not add an additional stage to that chain. The sequence remains intact. The claim made here is narrower: where development language is conceptually unstable, honesty may be sincere without being sufficiently accurate, and assessment may be responsive without being sufficiently reliable.

Definitional clarity is therefore best understood as an interpretive support condition for the accurate enactment of the sequence, not as a replacement for any part of it. It helps preserve the difference between what is felt, what is inferred, what is judged, and what is actually possible. Fieldethics depends on the same distinction at system level. When records, handovers, assessments, and case language rely on collapsed categories, institutions begin acting on distorted information. The issue is not only ethical. It is epistemic.

From Inner Misreading to Administrative Distortion

At personal level, unstable categories intensify self-harshness, false certainty, shame loops, and stalled development. At relational level, people may use the same words while referring to different lived processes, leading to conflict built partly from mismatched internal maps rather than fully shared meanings.

At institutional level, the same problem becomes administrative. Terms such as relapse, resistance, motivation, compliance, insight, stability, or progress can begin carrying more interpretation than the observed behaviour warrants. Once those terms enter notes, assessments, targets, and decisions, they influence thresholds, consequences, and opportunities. Cleaner language is therefore not cosmetic. It reduces interpretive drift and improves the reliability of what a system claims to know.

Toward a Standardised Language of Development

What is needed is not a perfect dictionary of the inner life. It is a more standardised, less moralised, functionally precise language for reading signals, states, and development. Such a language asks questions of function before

identity: What is being signalled? What state is present? What has been perceived? What meaning has been assigned? What judgement has entered? How much authorship is currently available? What becomes more or less possible from here?

Neutral here does not mean detached, affectless, or blind to value and power. It means less verdict-laden and more functionally precise: language that can describe what is being signalled, what state is present, what meaning has been assigned, and what judgement has entered before collapsing these into claims about identity, motive, or worth.

A workable development language should make it easier to distinguish alarm from truth, shame from conscience, overload from incapacity, feedback loop from insight, authorship reduction from character, and emotional signal from moral conclusion. The aim is not to invalidate experience. It is to make experience more readable and assessment more proportionate.

Conclusion

A shared language of development does not need to explain everything. It needs to preserve distinctions that matter for action. When signal, state, feeling, perception, interpretation, judgement, and authorship are kept more distinct, people gain a more reliable way to read what is happening, practitioners gain cleaner assessment language, and institutions gain information less distorted by moral shorthand.

That is a modest claim, but it is foundational. Without a stable interpretive layer, development work becomes easier to misread, and ethical systems design becomes easier to misapply. Definitional clarity alone does not create regulation, safety, honesty, or capacity. It does, however, make it more possible to recognise them accurately, support them appropriately, and avoid building decisions on categories that have already collapsed too much.

This note is therefore offered as a foundational starting point rather than a definitive statement: a first stable note beneath Horizon Theory and Fieldethics from which clearer development language can be refined, tested, and applied.