

Special Series



ON HUMAN COMMUNICATION (1964)¹

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I like to imagine an instrument which would enable us to break up patterns of suicidal behavior as the physicist breaks up a beam of light. Looking through this sociological spectroscope we would see spread out under the diffraction grating the rainbow-colored spectrum of all possible human attitudes to life. The whole distressing muddle would become neat, clear and comprehensive.
(From: *The Yogi and the Commissar* by Arthur Koestler)

Like any other discipline, psychiatry is contingent on its own basic premises. The psychiatrist's assumptions about the nature of the human mind will determine and limit the scope, direction and outcome of his endeavors. But much more than any other discipline, psychiatry is ultimately self-reflective: subject and object are identical, the mind studies itself, and any assumption have an inevitable tendency towards self-validation. Hence the constant quest for an Archimedean point which has led to a search for a satisfactory analogy of the mind in other fields of knowledge.

The dominant epistemological (origin, nature, methods and limits of knowing) model of each period is eventually also applied to the soul and thus we see the theological model of the Middle Ages replaced by a deification of Reason, and this goddess in turn dethroned by the romantically soulful notions of the natural philosophers and their all but forgotten discovery of the unconscious. The 19th century established the application of the medical model and at the beginning of our century psychiatry received its greatest impetus from the application of the first law of thermodynamics to the phenomena of mental functioning.

These phenomena were then seen as the outcome of a hypothesized interplay of forces, which appeared to follow very closely the laws of conservation and transformation of energy in physics, where, to quote Norbert Wiener, "materialism had apparently put its own grammar in order, and this grammar was dominated

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by the concept of energy.”² Freud’s psychodynamic viewpoint is thus of necessity an intrapsychic, causal, deterministic one which conceives of the here and now as the result of all past causes.

In view of this historical dependence of psychiatric thinking on the dominant epistemology of a given period, it is not surprising that psychiatry, and the behavioral sciences in general, are being deeply affected by the rapid evolution of knowledge since the end of World War II. Among the many new dimensions there is one of particular impact on our knowledge of man: that of information in addition to the classic concepts of matter and energy. The discovery that information about an effect, if properly fed back to the effector, will ensure the latter’s internal stability and its adaptation to environmental change, not only opened the door for the construction of higher-order (i.e. error-controlled, goal-seeking) machines and led to the postulation of cybernetics (methods of control and communication common to living things and machines) as a new epistemology, but also provided completely new insights into the functioning of biological and sociological systems.

The transition from psychodynamics as an explanatory principle—to the analysis of communication parallels the evolution from conventional mechanics to cybernetics. In both instances, the new model adds a completely new dimension to the old one. As is known, the psychoanalytic model of the mind postulates the ego as a mediator between the forces of the id, the demands of the superego, and the contingencies of the environment. The early writings of Freud and his school were almost exclusively concerned with the id and its dynamics; superego exploration came somewhat later, while ego psychology is a relatively recent addition to psychoanalytic research. These developments strikingly parallel the steps from Virchowian (German anthropologist, political leader, 1821–1902) pathology (origin, nature, cause of disease) via physiology to epidemiology. Interestingly enough however, the interdependence between the organism and the environment—although basically acknowledged—remained a curiously neglected field of study, and it is precisely here that the concept of information exchange, i.e. of *communication*, becomes indispensable.

An eminent psychiatrist, Thomas Hora, has stated: “To understand himself, man needs to be understood by another. To be understood by another, he needs to understand the other.” This cogent statement presupposes that the individuals involved are able to communicate with one another. It also implies that without other people to communicate to, a man would not only find himself lonely, but confused as well. Even Descartes’ dictum “Cogito, ergo sum—I think, therefore I am,” although meant to be axiomatic, ultimately amounts to self-awareness in terms of relationship. For there can be no thought without a content or object and outside a context; thought in and by itself is unthinkable. Consequently, without

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'something' to think about not even Descartes would have been aware of himself. To this consideration general semantics would probably add another weighty one: the word *is* *not* the thing and 'cogito,' 'ergo,' and 'sum' are abstractions of complexly structured relations.

The communicational approach to the phenomena of human behavior—both normal and abnormal—is based on the observable manifestations of relationship in the widest sense, and not on hypothetical entities inside the mind, as postulated by psychodynamics. This orientation brings the study of human communication into the highly respectable company of mathematics which, after all, is the one science most immediately concerned with the measurement of *relations between*, not the nature of things. Regretfully we must hasten to add that this affinity of our study with mathematics also terminates just about here: we are still a long way from a mathematical model of human communication; or, in the words of Warren S. McCulloch:

We still lack a realistic logic, even a useful calculus, of relations of more than two relata. A gave B to C, A looks like B to C, A thinks, believes, hopes, dreams that B is C—are all beyond our comprehension. If and when we psychiatrists talk nonsense of these relations—and we do—all we can plead is that the proper calculus is still to seek.

It should not, therefore, surprise the reader that what follows now will inevitably be of a very fragmentary character. The study of human communication, as defined by us elsewhere, is the investigation of the ways people affect one another by the message character of their behavior, of the ways they confirm or disconfirm, inspire or drive each other crazy.

More generally still we might say that it is the study of the interaction between human organisms and their environment, perceived by them as *reality*, and thus of their specific patterns and experiences of being in the world. If we now hyphenate these last four words it becomes apparent that communications theory must acknowledge its affinity with yet another realm, namely existential philosophy which studies man in the Here and Now of his being and, unlike other philosophies, takes into account that there are such things as emotional disorders. Having thus tried to define our field of study and to chart its position, let us now continue in a more practical, lighter vein.

FROM SMALL TALK TO GIBBERISH

Small talk is not really small. In fact, the art of saying nothing by saying something requires both talent and practice. Suppose you are on a plane and fate has placed in the seat next to you a fellow passenger who is determined to while away his time by making conversation. In this simple situation you will quickly discover for yourself some of the basic facts of human communication. First of all: *you cannot physically*

leave the field, and this places you at the mercy of your talkative neighbor. Your next discovery will be that—much as you would like to—you *cannot not communicate* with him. You may, for instance, try to feign sleepiness. If you are lucky, this may shut him up—he literally “gets your message.” In other words: even your having reclined your seat and lying there with your eyes closed is a message, a *non-verbal communication*, and you will have to continue it, for as soon as you re-open your eyes, he may start talking again. There are, of course, other possibilities. You may either ignore him or make it clear, more or less bluntly and in so many words, that you are not interested in conversation. Whether he seems hurt by this or not and whether you admit it to yourself or not, the ensuing silence is likely to be a rather embarrassed and strained one—so much so that you may even prefer not to go to the toilet in order to avoid having to climb over his legs and apologize for the disturbance. Needless to say, you will be secretly furious with him for creating this ridiculous situation, and with yourself for your helplessness.

Your alternative would be to give in and make conversation. But unless you do not mind baring your soul to this experienced conversationalist, you will soon appreciate the wisdom of the Army rule: In case of capture give only name, rank and serial number. For he will not be content with learning your views on the weather, but will want to know all about you, including your thoughts, feelings and beliefs. And once you have started talking, you will find it much more difficult than before to remain in control of the situation.

This is where the art of Small Talk as a defense comes in. It consists of a hundred little tricks, all designed to make communication meaningless. Some of them have names, such as switching the subject, (slightly connected) tangentializations, incomplete sentences, deliberate misunderstanding, obscure style or mannerisms of speech, the literal interpretation of metaphor and the metaphorical interpretation of literality, and probably many others which still await their classification by a conscientious communications expert. Internationally, the Italians lead the field with their inimitable response “ma . . .” which—strictly speaking—means “but,” while in actual fact it can mean doubt, agreement, disagreement, bewilderment, indifference, surprise, anger, resignation, lack of interest, sarcasm—maybe a dozen more things and therefore nothing. Another splendid example of this type of communication is given in the opening scene of the motion picture “Lolita,” where Quilty, threatened by the pistol-wielding Humbert, goes into a paroxysm of verbal and non-verbal gibberish, while his rival tries in vain to get across his message: “Look, I am going to shoot you!” Is this mere panic or a clever defense?

Only on the surface, it may seem surprising that his kind of communication is typical of so-called mentally disturbed individuals who are caught in the identical dilemma. They, too, cannot leave the field, they cannot *not* communicate, but for very good reasons they are afraid or unwilling to communicate, and eventually either withdraw or produce verbal and non-verbal gibberish. It is one of the postulates of the communicational approach that a piece of behavior can only be understood within the context in which it occurs. This means that at the clinical end of the

behavioral spectrum, “crazy” behavior is not necessarily the manifestation of a sick mind, but may be the only possible reaction to an absurd or untenable communicational context. Seen in this light the terms “sanity” and “insanity” practically lose their meaning as attributes of individuals.

Recently, on a television program, the Colonel asked his Sergeant what time it was. “Ten minutes to something,” replied the Sergeant. The Colonel, irritated, stated “That doesn’t help me any. Ten minutes to what?” “I don’t know,” replied the Sergeant, “because I’ve lost my minute hand.” It was impossible to tell from the context in which this speech occurred whether this was a double joke, that is, he not only lost a hand from his wristwatch and continued to wear it, but it was the hour hand that was telling him what the minute hand should have told, or whether this was simply a slip on the actor’s part, and he meant to say—“I have lost my hour hand.”

This kind of puzzlement about what is being communicated is an all too frequent occurrence with most of us. We rely heavily on context and on non-verbal communication, as well as on words, in order to get the other person’s meaning. However, we are often not aware of doing so until a situation arises where contextual or other clues are missing, and we find ourselves very puzzled.

THE PLIGHT OF THE LONE DISSENTER

In a series of by now classic experiments, Asch provided evidence for the almost unbelievable power of communication over the mental functioning of otherwise perfectly normal individuals. Briefly, in these experiments a group of college students were subjected to a number of very simple tests of visual perception: they had to indicate which two of three parallel lines were longer. However, all except one student (the actual subject) had previously been briefed to give unanimously the identical wrong response. They were seated so that the unbriefed and unsuspecting student’s turn always came last, i.e., after all the others had matter-of-factly and unanimously stated their “guess.” It was found that under these circumstances only very few subjects had the strength to rely on their own perceptions and to maintain and defend them in the face of massive group disqualification. Seventy-five per cent agreed with the majority in varying degrees, some blindly others with considerable anxiety and a feeling of depersonalization.

Unfortunately, Asch’s findings are by no means an academic affair. Virtually the same communicational context can be found with distressing frequency in the family background of schizophrenic patients. As though by secret convention these families unanimously insist that no one is unhappy about anything other than the fact that their son or daughter happens to be sick. This places the patient in very much the same situation as Asch’s subjects; except that for obvious reasons it is infinitely more difficult to be a minority of one in one’s own family than in a group of unrelated students. These patients live in a world, which is constantly labeled

for them by their families as normal, while in actual fact even a brief interview with the whole family may open truly chaotic vistas. The patient is thus faced with the dilemma of either freeing himself from his label as the sole source of all the trouble and misery by pointing to the family's real problems, or doubting his own perceptions. Just as the above-mentioned student, he is more likely to choose the latter alternative. One such decision paves the way for another and so on ad infinitum.

This brings us to another postulate of theory: the shift from the individual mind to the communicational context makes it less important to search for the origin of a specific piece of behavior (e.g. a symptom) in the past than to study its function in the here and now. After all, there is probably no individual life history which does not offer potential starting points for just about all the functional symptoms described in a good textbook of psychiatry.

THE SYMPTOM AS COMMUNICATION

Let us return once more to our two fictitious airplane passengers and look more closely at the communicational meaning of passenger A's non-verbal message "I am tired." We assumed that this will silence passenger B. Now, on a more abstract level, A is doing something very intricate. He does not want to appear impolite and simply ask B to be silent, since by the rules of society this could be called rude. Instead, by closing his eyes, etc., he communicates non-verbally: "I would not mind talking to you, but something stronger than I, namely my tiredness, for which I cannot be blamed, prevents me." In our example this invocation of powers or reasons beyond one's control still has a rub: A knows that he really is cheating. But the communicational "ploy" becomes perfect, once a person has convinced himself that he is at the mercy of forces beyond his control and thereby has freed himself of both the blame by significant others as well as the pangs of his own conscience. This, however, is just a more complicated way of saying he has a (psychoneurotic, psychosomatic, or psychotic) symptom. Margaret Mead, in describing the difference between American and Russian personalities, remarked that an American might use the *excuse* of having a headache to get out of going to a party but the Russian would actually *have* the headache.

This communicational definition of a symptom may seem to contain a moot assumption, namely that one can *convince oneself* in this way. Instead of digging in behind the rather unconvincing argument that everyday clinical experience fully supports this assumption, we should like to mention another psychological experiment. A subject is placed in front of a tachistoscope, a device by which words can be made visible for very brief periods of time in a small window. The list of test words is composed of neutral and "critical," or emotionally toned words (e.g. rape, filth, whore). The subject's threshold is first determined for a few trial words and he is then instructed to report to the experimenter whatever

he sees or thinks he sees on each subsequent exposure. A comparison between the subject's performance with the neutral and with the embarrassing words shows significantly higher thresholds of recognition for the latter. But this means that in order to produce more failures with the socially tabooed words, the subject must first identify them as such and then somehow convince himself that he was unable to read them. The obvious pay-off is that he spares himself the embarrassment of having to read them aloud to the experimenter.³ Let us recapitulate. Communications theory conceives of a symptom as the non-verbal message: It is not I who does not (or does) want to do this, it is something outside my control, e.g. nerves, my illness, my anxiety, my bad eyes, alcohol, my upbringing, the communists, or my wife.

THE GAME WITHOUT AN END

Children sometimes invent a game which essentially consists in the substitution of 'yes' for 'no' and vice versa. In other words, they agree that whatever they are going to say will mean its opposite. Thus, "I don't want a piece of your candy" means "I want a piece," "It is late" means "It is early" and so forth. This sovereign manipulation of meaning is fascinating (and not only to children) and the game is great fun as long as it lasts. But the reader may already anticipate a fatal complication: there is no way of stopping it. Once the rules have been set and agreed upon, the game gets out of its inventors' hands. How can they revert to normal communication? The message "Let's not play this any more" means "Let's continue playing," if understood within the frame set by the rule of inversion. The message "Let's continue playing it," on the other hand, may either be taken as simply a reiteration of the original agreement; or, if understood as being made within the frame of the rules, it merely means "Let's stop *playing*," but offers no guarantee that thereby the orderly universe in which "yes" means "yes" and "no" means "no" is re-established in everybody's mind. We knew a little girl who was so frightened by this unexpected disappearance of her familiar world of meaning that she nearly went into a tantrum. A minute later, however, she found the solution. She ran for help to her mother, who had not participated in the game, and had mother rule by edict that the game was now over and that everybody had to talk normally again.⁴

³We want to mention only in passing that in general psychological testing has more or less neglected to look at the communicational context of any testing arrangement. There can hardly be any doubt that it makes quite a difference to the subject and his performance whether he has to communicate with a shrivelled old professor, a robot, or a beautiful blonde. . . .

⁴An analogous situation exists in the United States Senate, where the rule for unlimited debate cannot be changed within the contingency created by the rule itself. Cloture, of course, is subject to debate and therefore can be effectively blocked by the use of the prerogative conferred by the rule, i.e. filibuster. Here, however, there is no outsider who can rule by edict that the game is over.

Two levels of abstraction are involved in this game. On the lower level we find all those communications, which are made within the frame, set by the rule of inversion of meaning. The rule itself, obviously, belongs to a higher level of abstraction, for it is a communication *about* the kind of communication to be used by the players, i.e. a *meta-communication*. In other words, the game is based on the rule that “every communication means its opposite,” but this rule is not subject to itself; rather, in order to be understood, agreed upon and obeyed, the rule itself must be subject to a meta-rule: “every communication means what it means and nothing else.” Were it not so, the game could not be planned and played. We thus realize that two mutually exclusive and contradictory rules are applied to the two levels respectively. Please note that this contradiction is not a simple one, as for instance the absurd request “Go away closer,” but that it is peculiarly complicated as a result of its involving two different levels. If these two levels could be neatly separated, both in speaking and in thinking, no confusion could arise. But this would require two separate languages, while in actual fact we have only one. As we have seen, the message “Let’s stop playing this game” is meaningful at both levels, but the two meanings are contradictory. This is why, once the game is under way, it becomes undecidable what a communication means, for it may equally well mean what it says or its opposite.

An identical problem, arising from the confusion of levels, has been known to mathematicians for a long time. As far back as 1899, David Hilbert attempted the axiomatization of geometry and coined the term meta-mathematics for any statements or rules the relations of which obtain in a given mathematical system. Hilbert clearly recognized that these statements or rules are not themselves part of, and therefore are not contained within, that system. It would appear that all the famous paradoxes, from Epimenides, the Cretan, who supposedly said “All Cretans are liars,” to the Richardian and Russellian paradoxes, are based on a confusion of levels with meta levels. In 1931, the mathematician Kurt Gödel proved that meta-mathematical statements can be formulated which are formally undecidable because they assert both themselves *and* their negations. Gödel further showed that arithmetic is ultimately incomplete, because its consistency cannot be proved in its own “language,” i.e. formal arithmetical calculus. It could only be proved by additional axioms outside the calculus, and these axioms would in turn be undecidable in and by themselves and would thus lead into an infinite regress.

If Gödel can be credited with having explored the discontinuity of levels in mathematical thinking, the merit of having first postulated an analogous hierarchy of levels and of having introduced it into psychiatry goes to the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. He pointed out that repeated learning experiences not only bring about an increase of knowledge, but also an increased ability to acquire knowledge. For instance, if someone comes to master several foreign languages, the outcome is not only a knowledge of several languages, but, generally, also a greater ease in learning languages. In other words, he not only *learned* languages,

but also *learned to learn* languages. For this second order of learning which is a progressive change in the rate of first-order learning, Bateson coined the term “deutero-learning, i.e. learning to learn. Obviously, deutero-learning is of a higher, more abstract logical type than first order learning. Expanding, as Bateson did, the meaning of “learning” from its formal, scholastic implication to include all changes within an organism in response to signals from the environment, it can be seen that deutero-learning refers to those phenomena in which the psychiatrist is preponderantly interested, namely the changes whereby an individual comes to act as if he expects his world to be structured in one way rather than another. His second-order premises *about* the world are equivalent to the highly complex emotional patterns of relationships which he has abstracted in the course of his life. It is they which lead him to “punctuate” the sequence of events in his own unique way and to call the outcome “objective reality.” The parallelism between Gödel’s proof on the one hand and the phenomena arising from the level structure of human communication is so impressive that we can only hope that one day it will be explored by an interdisciplinary team.

For the time being let us merely point out that international relations offer another example for the game we have just described. There were times when an enemy general’s word of honor could be trusted implicitly and was, therefore, a more reliable factor than a fortress bristling with arms. But the ability to meta-communicate appropriately has long since been lost and today the meaning of the message “We want peace” is un-decidable, for it may mean just this, or it may be a ruse and mean “We want to destroy you.”

“BE SPONTANEOUS!”

Paradox, as we have seen, arises from a confusion of level and meta-level. It creates a situation in which a statement is true, if false; and false, if true. If all Cretans are liars, then this statement, made by a Cretan, is a lie, but if it is a lie, then Epimenides has spoken the truth, and so forth in infinite regress. We shall now attempt to show how paradox can enter human communication. For this purpose we shall slightly modify an example taken from Nagel and Neyman. It is correct to write: Chicago is a *populous city*. But it is incorrect to write: “*Chicago*” has three syllables, for in this context single quotation marks must be used, i.e. “*Chicago*” has three syllables. If we now ask ourselves what distinguishes the two meanings of “Chicago,” we realize that in the first sentence it is used as a word referring to a vast conglomeration of buildings in a specific geographical location. In the second sentence, however, this same word refers to a class of words and has nothing to do with geography. The single quotation marks point to this difference in the level of abstraction and indicate, as it were, that the word is to be understood at the appropriate (i.e. meta) level. Next we make the two sentences into one (Chicago is a populous city and has three syllables), dictate

it to our secretary and threaten her with dismissal if she cannot or will not write it down correctly. Of course, she cannot.

An absurd situation? Admittedly yes, but analogous situations are much more frequent in human communications than would appear at first sight. All messages in which spontaneous behavior is demanded by the sender of the message create such situations. Take, for instance, a wife's request of her passive husband: "I want you to dominate me." The fatal thing about this message is that once it has been conveyed, there is no way out of the untenable situation created by it—very much as in the Game Without an End. The husband has only two alternatives: he can continue in his passive ways and displease her by not respecting her wish, or he can behave in a more domineering fashion, in which case she will still be displeased for, after all, he is at a higher level only obeying rather than dominating her. Even if he now turns into a real male, it will at best remain undecidable—in Godel's sense—if he has "really" changed or if he is only trying particularly hard to please her. Other messages belonging to this category are "You ought to love me," "Don't be so obedient" and any other conceivable variation of the theme "Be spontaneous." It should also be realized that these paradoxical situations are not usually expressed in words. Or we can communicate "be spontaneous" in a variety of ways including non-verbal ones. We have all met individuals who ruin a party by insisting through their forced gaiety that everyone *ought* to have fun.

There exists a simple mechanical model which incorporates the essence of a paradox, namely the electric buzzer. As is known, the buzzer is so constructed that its circuit opens when it is closed and closes when opened. In other words, it gives an oscillatory yes-no-yes-no response. But there is a significant difference between the behavior of the buzzer and that of a human being when exposed to paradox. The husband in our example will not begin to oscillate between dominant and obedient behavior, but once the inescapable absurdity of his wife's request dawns upon him and he finds himself unable to make her see his untenable position, he may tear out his hair, or react in some other highly irrational way. Worse still, he may withdraw which only increases his wife's behavior and starts a vicious cycle. If he is asked what the problem is, he will state "I withdraw because she nags," but her answer will be: "I nag him because he withdraws," and so on *ad infinitum*.

THE DOUBLE BIND

The imaginary secretary to whom we dictated the paradoxical sentence about Chicago and threatened with dismissal if she could not, or refused to, write it, and the husband confronted with the equally paradoxical demand by his wife, are both caught in a specific untenable *position*. This position was defined by Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland in 1956 and called a Double Bind. Briefly a Double Bind is the following communicational context:

1. Two or more persons are involved in an intense relationship, which has a high degree of survival value. It is, therefore, vitally important for them to discriminate messages accurately and to respond appropriately to them. Situations in which such intense relationships come about are infancy, infirmity, material dependence, loyalty, social norms, captivity in the hands of a ruthless power, etc.
2. Into this situation, paradox is introduced by a message which is so structured that it contradicts itself at the meta-level.
3. As explained under 1 above, the participants cannot leave the field; they cannot, therefore, *not* communicate, not even by silence, but on the other hand they cannot meta-communicate about the level at which messages are to be understood. The meaning of vital messages thus remains undecidable.

Our theory is that the incomprehensible speech of schizophrenics results from their attempts to say something and not to say it at the same time—the only solution left if they are to obey all the rules imposed by a double bind. For example, a young schizophrenic woman bounced into the psychiatrist's office for her first interview and cheerfully announced: "My mother had to get married and now I'm here." It took weeks to elucidate some of the many meanings which she had condensed into this statement at the same time that she had disqualified them by her display of apparent humor and zestfulness. In point of fact she was feeling increasingly trapped in an impossible situation and her opening gambit was supposed to inform the therapist that:

1. She was the result of an illegitimate pregnancy;
2. This fact had somehow caused her psychosis;
3. "Here" meant both the psychiatrist's office and her presence on earth, and thus implied that on the one hand mother had driven her crazy while on the other hand she had to be eternally indebted to her mother who had sinned and suffered to bring her into the world;
4. "Had to get married" referred to the shot-gun nature of the mother's wedding and could either mean that mother was not to be blamed because social pressure had forced her into the marriage, or that mother resented the forced nature of the situation and blamed the patient's existence for it.

"Schizophrenese" is a language which leaves it up to the listener to take his choice from among many possible meanings which are not only different from, but may be even incompatible with one another. This being so, it becomes possible to deny any or all aspects of a message. If pressed for an answer to what she had meant by her remark, this patient could conceivably have said casually: "Oh, I don't know; I guess I must be crazy." If asked for an elucidation of anyone aspect of it, she could have answered: "Oh no, this is not at all what I meant . . ." But even though condensed beyond immediate recognition, her statement is a cogent description

of the paradoxical situation she finds herself in, and the remark “I must be crazy” would be quite appropriate in view of the amount of self-deception necessary to adapt herself to this paradoxical universe.

The following, more extensive example of schizophrenic communication is taken from the recorded interview of a young man. He, too, is talking about his mother, and we can again observe the same non-committal commitment which is so typical of “schizophrenese.” In addition, the example is rich in symbolism and metaphor which convey to it a near-poetic quality:

“How can you prove that you have two mothers, when you have the same color eye? As that book is. Only prove that she’s supposed to have movement in her. ‘Cause of what she caused, we’re condemning ourselves. You must realize that. Especially if you’re on the wrong side. You must realize that men have actually gone and lived. That there aren’t very many Chinese. You get a chance to walk—they’ll pull a war whenever possible, and try and blame it onto the other group. If they ever pull you off, they’ll try and blame you for everything that they can. And also change the color of a man, if he turns around and gets killed when he causes a war.”

As it stands, this speech is very obscure. But armed with a knowledge of this patient’s background and problems, Gregory Bateson attempted a “translation” which yields significant insight into the paradox of his situation:

“I cannot say that my mother is guilty. After all, I am the same sort of person she is. Or was my grandmother guilty? She had eyes as blue as that book there, and was the same sort of person as my mother and I. I can say that she affected me because she made me crazy (by her love). But if I say that, I thereby make myself unlovable. I would only be condemning myself. Surely you can understand that. After all, you are just like she was. Look, there are people who really live (not like me and my mother). Not everybody lives with a wall between him and life. But whenever I get a chance to live, the quarreling starts. My parents blame me for it, just as everybody always blames the other side. And if they succeed in preventing me from living, they will always turn on me and blame me for everything or, like you, they will try to change what sort of man I am. If I should turn and try to live and get beaten down, my trying to live would cause a war.”

Again, it becomes clear that the patient’s statement is highly meaningful and portrays his dilemma, but that it is also so carefully “coded” that an understanding is almost impossible. By this we do not mean to imply that the patient is doing all this “on purpose.” More than anybody else, he himself suffers from his own confusion, and the need for self-deception. And just as one lie is likely to require more and more lies to support itself, self-deceptions or misperceptions have a similar tendency to increase and spread over ever larger areas of an individual’s world. To a fictitious person caught in this dilemma, the following limerick could be dedicated:

There was a young man named Caruther
 Who made a “decision for Mother”;
 The error, though slight,
 Caused an odious plight—
 One misperception leads to another.

There is, however, one point that even in a very summary explanation of the double bind concept must be made quite clear. From the above the reader may get the impression that in a double bind there is always a binder and a victim. But, needless to say, all relationship patterns are by their very nature mutual. It is usually quite impossible to trace the originator of the first move which leads to this paradoxical impasse in a relationship. All that can be said is that once this pattern has been established it binds all participants; there are no villains and no victims.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARADOX

As we have stated, a paradox is a message having at least two levels one of which is in conflict with the other (“don’t be so obedient”).

Why the mind should be so vulnerable to the effects of paradox is still very unclear. It may have to do with the fact that brain cells, like all other neurons, are capable of only two responses: to fire or to remain inactive. This means that they can respond “yes” or “no” to given nervous input, but seem, by their very nature, incapable of reacting adequately to a “yes *and* no” input. This hypothesis is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons, the most important of which is perhaps the undeniable fact that not only schizophrenia, the most frequent form of insanity, but also the noblest pursuits of the mind are intimately linked to paradox. Fantasy, play, humor, love, artistic creativity and religious experience would be impossible without man’s ability to experience paradox.

Neurophysiologists may discover combinations of digital and analogic neural systems that may throw light on the problem of paradox.

Tai-hui, a Zen master of the 12th century, used to carry a short bamboo stick which he held forth before an assembly of monks, and said: “If you call this a stick, you affirm; if you call it not a stick, you negate. Beyond affirmation and negation what would you call it?” This is a typical Zen-buddhistic “koan,” designed to create a psychological impasse through which the mind is to obtain enlightenment. That is the difference between this paradox imposed by the master on the pupil, and the paradox which leaves “crazy” behavior as the only possible reaction as in the family double bind situation. Clearly, one man’s meat is here another man’s poison.

Hippocrates’ sophism *similia similibu curantur*—likes are cured by likes—besides being the basis for homeopathy, is in a curious way the basis of psychotherapy. Regardless of the theory behind any given technique of psychotherapeutic

intervention, the treatment situation is rich in communicational paradox and these paradoxes are used to correct the paradoxes the patient brings with him.

That paradox is of importance in the psychoanalytic or psychotherapeutic situation seems odd because these situations are usually seen as the therapist helping the patient achieve reality by listening to what the patient's unconscious is saying. Those interested in communication think that the psychotherapeutic situation is a little more complicated than this. For example, when two adults meet, they exchange information with each other either deliberately or unwittingly. In the psychoanalytic situation, especially, such sharing is kept to a minimum. Similarly, adults attempt to phrase what they say in a reasonably logical and consistent manner so that the other individual can follow the meaning that they are attempting to convey. In the analytic situation the patient is asked to follow the fundamental rule of saying what comes into his head, no matter how silly it may seem to him and no matter how lacking in context; that is, the patient is taught to omit those verbal cues that would acquaint himself and his hearer with the setting (in time, in place, et cetera) of his remarks. In ordinary adult conversation, either member may comment on the manner and behavior of the other and his comments are accepted if they are not considered rude. In the analytic situation, only comments about the patient are permitted; comments on the analyst are turned aside or subjected to interpretation and so are not accepted at face value in the usual adult fashion. In addition, the analytic patient must respond to a regularity of time and duration of visits, more reminiscent of his school days than adult social intercourse. Furthermore, he must pay a fee for the company of the analyst and carry on his conversation while he is recumbent and the analyst is not. Finally, the patient is expected to express himself *freely* and *spontaneously* to a man who shows the utmost of reserve and inscrutability. In such a situation, the patient cannot possibly manifest the more easy exchange of adult conversation and is forced to attempt an interchange more reminiscent of earlier learned tactics when he was small and others were very large. In fact, to respond in a rational and mature way, the analytic patient would have to refuse to follow the analyst's directions to lie down and free-associate. Indeed, should the patient behave in an adult way, it could be said that the treatment was going badly; for example, the concept of resistance is employed when the patient does not follow the analyst's directions. What has been said about psychoanalysis applies to nearly the same extent to most dynamic psychotherapy. In any case, viewing the psychotherapeutic or analytic situation as an interchange between two people provides an opportunity for an explanation of the patient's behavior which is rather different from the usual one. One can recognize that a therapy designed to increase the patient's maturity forces him to be more mature by creating a regressive situation. The most striking paradoxes, perhaps, in the analytic situation come about because the patient comes to an expert who will help him by taking charge and tell him

what to do with his problems as experts are supposed to do. The analyst responds to the situation by putting the patient in charge. He clearly indicates that the patient must do the work and that he is merely a kind of psychological midwife, assisting natural forces. However, while indicating that he will not tell the patient what to do and at the same time that he puts the patient in charge, the analyst takes charge by directing the patient to lie down, to free-associate, to arrive at a certain time on certain days, to pay a certain fee, and he will not let the patient direct him, and may even be silent if the patient demands that he talk. Therefore, in a non-directive setting at one level, the analyst at another level directs the crucial behavior in the situation; namely, *who* is to speak, *what* is to be said, and *how* it is to be said. A further paradox resides in the very tricky question of whether the analytic relationship is a compulsory or a voluntary one. Often, a patient is excessively concerned in his own personal life with a question of whether his intimates associate with him because they want to or because they must, just as he is uncertain whether he is with them because he is ill or because he wishes to be. In analysis, the patient is told that his relationship is voluntary and his improvement depends upon his willingness to cooperate and to attend sessions. Yet if the patient is late or misses a session, the analyst objects and so indicates that the relationship is compulsory. The patient talks to a man who is hired to talk to him, while within that framework the analyst indicates that analysis offers an opportunity for a deep relationship and this concept is reinforced by transference interpretations which imply that the patient is being markedly influenced and controlled by the analyst.

The presence of paradoxes in the treatment situation is in no way a criticism of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy they are undoubtedly crucial to the force of therapy just as they play vital roles in certain other kinds of human experience.

CONCLUSION

This article has dealt mainly with pathologies of human communication. This is deliberate because here one can see in bold relief the complexities that occur in ordinary human exchange. Additionally, if we can better understand how people, and eventually nations, drive each other crazy, there may be clues how to treat and prevent such pathologies.

The ordinary citizen bears the complexities of communication much like he bears the burden of the bomb—in a waiting unawareness. He is bombarded by tricky messages from advertisers but rarely experiences and reacts to the distortions. Only in considering special states like insanity, insobriety, and first love is he apt to be intrigued or amused by the enormous complexities involved communicating with another.

Perhaps this bit of Zen will convey to some of you the spirit of our interest in communication:

To think
that I am not going to think of you any more
is still thinking of you.
Let me then try
not to think
that I am not going to think of you

SUGGESTED READING

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