

## **BATESON REVISITED THE MIND, FAMILIES, AND AA**

***Ronnie Barracato***  
*Kutztown University*

The criteria developed by Bateson for any aggregate of phenomena, or any system, is such that in order to understand the system an explanation that is different from the characteristics of the individual parts is needed. The idea is that such a structuring of epistemology, evolution and epigenesis is possible. This is a list of the criterion for an ecology of mind (Bateson, 1979):

- A mind is an aggregate of interacting parts or components.
- The interaction between parts of mind is triggered by difference.
- Mental process requires collateral energy.
- Mental process requires circular (or more complex) chains of determination.
- In mental process, the effects of difference are to be regarded as transforms (i.e., coded versions) of events that preceded them.
- The description and classification of these processes of transformation disclose a hierarchy of logical types immanent in the phenomena.

### **A Mind Is An Aggregate Of Interacting Parts Or Components**

Some parts of the whole may qualify as a system. Minds may have sub-minds and so forth. The fact remains that when considered separately each part or subsystem does not achieve the complexity of the whole. It is the organization and interaction between components that define the nature of the system. (Bateson, 1979). Medical and biological theories propose that mental processes are characteristic of atomic structures. Bateson disagrees. Because the smaller particles cannot be differentiated, the complex process of the mind is a result of the interaction of the particles. His basic premise is that mental functioning is immanent in the interaction of differentiated "parts." The system is made up of such combined interactions. His theory of mind is holistic.

The family is a system made up of interacting members. A whole system of events takes place when two or more family members interact. The nature of how feelings, opinions, ideas and so forth are expressed is a composite of family functioning. Power, decision-making, relationships, coping mechanisms, communication patterns and the like are determined by system rules and boundaries. "The behavioral cycles in each family are governed by a belief system that is composed of a combination of attitude basic assumptions, expectations, prejudices, convictions and beliefs brought to the nuclear family from his/her family of origin (Papp, 1983)." The belief system is a function of the whole. The environment is also considered a part of the family system. Each family member is connected individually to the environment and the family system and is tied into the larger whole via communities, schools, government, religion, organizations and so forth. Family members and their environmental resources are the "differentiated parts" whose interaction determines the cybernetic personality of the system. A family embedded in alcoholism is vulnerable to the stress impeded on its structure. This impedance will relieve or cause more stress (Steinglass, 1987).

Bateson worked with alcoholics at the VA hospital in Palo Alto. He used a systems theoretical approach. He feared he was very little help to them. Some of the alcoholics attended AA. The principles, religious views and organizational characteristics of AA are highly embedded in systemic theory. Bateson was not only interested in a systems approach to alcoholism, but in the method AA uses to treat it. Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share a common problem, alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking (Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc., 1952). Alcoholics' lives depend on AA. AA stays whole or members die. Without this wholeness, the heart of AA would cease and the arteries would no longer carry the life giving grace. Alcoholics realize they are part of a great whole. Each alcoholic must consider the welfare of the other so that an abiding faith transcends the frailty of alcoholism. Each AA member is part of a group and all the groups make up the whole. AA's 12th Step is a priceless gift that allows AA's to carry its message to those still suffering from alcoholism. The reward for being part of the whole of AA is sobriety.

### **The Interaction Between Parts Of Mind Is Triggered By Difference**

The mind is made up of a world of ideas. A relationship between two individual parts or the same part at two separate points in time will trigger a difference. A third component will respond to this difference. The sense of touch is the best way to explain: As the tip of one's finger is moved across a surface that is both smooth and rough, a difference is felt where the smooth and rough surface connect. This change from smooth to rough is what Bateson theorizes as difference. Difference is the nature of relationship between two individual parts. Effective differences are considered information. Difference is qualitative. Stimulus is a member of a class of information coming in through a sense organ, although an idea is a difference that travels and undergoes successive transformation throughout the loop (Bateson, 1979). The interaction of family members is also triggered by difference. A spouse over- compensates for the other spouse, which in turn initiates a response of under functioning by the other spouse. A spouse of an alcoholic may take on more responsibilities, for instance working more hours, paying all the bills, doing all the cleaning and tending to the children. The alcoholic spouse now has more free time to go to bars, squander money, take off from work and so forth. Over- responsible and under-responsible are complimentary roles that the spouses develop. Unless complimentary roles are restrained, a progressive

distortion of personalities will result in hostility and a system breakdown between the spouses. It takes a difference to trigger this style of relating. Each spouse responds complementarily to the actions of the other. Also, difference triggers change. It is typical for a spouse who gives up drinking to take on a more responsible symmetrical role. Now there are two over-responsible spouses interacting symmetrically. This leads to maximization and, again, system breakdown. Symmetrical interaction is similar to an arms race. One country escalates, then the other. A symmetrical relationship continues until there is war. A complimentary or symmetrical relationship between family members will over-tax the system. This style of relationship destroys families. AA offers another perspective for the alcoholic. The difference is in the epistemology. Alcoholics have lost control when it comes to drinking. Bateson suggests that the total personality of an alcoholic, drunk or sober, is a personality that cannot resist the temptation to drink. It is a double bind. When sober, the mind says try some more control. Once alcohol is ingested, the body craves more. The first two steps of AA are:

- We admitted we are powerless over alcohol that our lives had become unmanageable.
- Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity (Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc.; 1939).

The symmetrical pride of the alcoholic admits defeat to a power greater than self: John Barleycorn must die. A complimentary shift takes place. Alcoholics come to believe in AA. AA is a source of strength greater than the individual that can encourage sobriety by supporting an epistemological shift toward a less competitive; hence less self-destructive patterns of behavior.

### **Mental Processes Require Collateral Energy**

Mental process requires energy. Mental process is triggered by difference. Difference is information, not energy. Collateral energy is waiting to be used. It is similar to the electrical energy that turns on a light. Collateral energy, per se, is waiting at the contacts of the electrical switch for some human being to flip the switch. When the switch is made a current will flow through a completed circuit and ignite the light. Mental process contains energy waiting for its circuits to be engaged. Bateson uses the analogy that "music turns you on." It is more true to say that the music releases a passion. From a humanistic perspective, the self-actualizing tendency can be considered collateral energy. If one person can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within herself/himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur (Rogers, 1961).

---

*From a humanistic perspective, the self-actualizing tendency can be considered collateral energy. Like music releasing passion, relationships release the innate desire to grow.*

---

Like music releasing passion, relationships release the innate desire to grow. Families also have collateral energy waiting to be released. For example, "take the pecking order--" a husband comes home from work frustrated, rants and raves to his wife about how filthy the place is and where is his supper. She in turn harps on the oldest child to lend a hand, set the table, clean up and take care of the other children. The oldest shuts off the TV, yells at all the kids to start helping out and get their homework done. The baby, who is only three, is frustrated because he can't watch loony toons so he kicks the dog. It is true that the kick is partly due to Newton's laws of physics. The dog could go into orbit if kicked hard enough. In actuality, the dog responds with energy from metabolism, as do the rest, collateral energy. The point being that in the control of action by information, energy is already available in advance of the impact of events (Bateson, 1979).

The AA group has the same collateral energy. Newcomers walk into AA for the first time and tell a little about themselves. The rest of the group responds by sharing how it was for them, what happened and what it is like now to be sober. The group is reminded of their experiences drinking and the newcomer feels more a part of AA.

## **Mental Process Requires Circular (Or More Complex) Chains Of Determination**

Circular causality, or systemic thinking, is the premise for Bateson's work. Systems, communications, and cybernetic theory is circular because a change in events at any point in the circuit will travel around the circuit and produce more changes at that point. The mind and computer process information very similarly. The mind transfers and recalls information from memory. It sends information to the arithmetic unit for processing and retrieves it. The mind inputs and outputs ideas. The ideas may be a certain train of thought. The mind controls the timing that is essential in synchronizing the circuitry. Feedback of information in the loop is either regenerative (positive) or degenerative (negative). Negative feedback will cause system stability. Positive feedback will cause runaway. The relative timing in the complete circuit is important in transmitting information sequentially. Digital and analog components inherently transform information (Bateson, 1971).

Families are also a complex system containing circular feedback circuits. "Circular causality, on the other hand, places individual behavior within a network of circular feedback loops (an individual family member's behavior affects other family members who in turn affect the individual)" (Worden, 1994). An analogy for the family is a mobile (Wegsheider Cruse, 1989). The mobile consists of butterflies suspended by strings that are attached to sticks. Family members are the butterflies. The sticks and strings represent the family rules and boundaries. If one family member fluctuates with the wind the rest will compensate to balance the system. Negative feedback brings the family back to a homeostatic state. This happens when a child acts out to take the focus off his/her parent's difficulties. Here again, complimentary and symmetrical styles of relating are established. Family members are now locked in roles that bogs down individual growth and obstructs developmental and environmental life cycle changes. "The individual gets trapped into one role, and his [sic.] personal potentials are gradually deformed to fit its demand" (Wegsheider Cruse, 1989).

Alcoholics develop a symmetrical personality as part of their system. They go drink for drink with others. Then they try their luck at self control like non-alcoholics. Family and friends have little luck challenging the alcoholic's symmetrical pride. An alcoholic will respond to them with resentment. Alcoholics contend that they can stay on the wagon. After a brief period of success the alcoholic cannot maintain the motivation to resist. John Barleycorn waits patiently. Symmetrical pride needs continuous opposition from the opponent. The alcoholic drinks again and begins a new battle with booze to the death. Bateson contends that this is a basic psychiatric problem. Under certain circumstances, the alcoholic's discomfort activates a positive feedback loop to increase the drinking behavior that preceded the behavior. Positive feedback verifies that the drinking behavior brought about the discomfort in the first place and will increase the discomfort until a threshold is reached where change can take place.

Positive feedback loops are used by therapists to push clients in the direction of their symptoms. The technique is called a therapeutic double bind (Bateson, 1971). A lose/lose situation is changed into a win/win situation because if a client controls his/her alcohol use successfully he wins; or if the client fails to control her alcohol use she wins because she has taken the direction of the therapist to keep drinking. AA also suggests to the newcomer who is unsure about the nature of alcoholism to try some controlled drinking (e.g., "Perhaps you're not an alcoholic at after all. Why don't you try some more controlled drinking, bearing in mind, meanwhile, what we have told you about alcoholism.") (AA World Service, Inc., 1952). After every spree, the alcoholic would say to him or herself, "Maybe those AA's were right." John Barleycorn himself was AA's best advocate.

### **In Mental Process, The Effects Of Difference Are To Be Regarded As Transforms (i.e., Coded Versions) Of The Difference Which Preceded Them**

Differences, information, trains of thought, ideas and the like cycle around the loop or system. The resulting new information can be regarded as patterns, redundancy, action sequences, coding, new idea formation and so forth. An object, event, or difference from outside the mind can be a new source of information provided it is incorporated into the circuitry and is flexible enough to travel about the loop and produce change. Bateson borrowed the expression that "the map is not the territory." By this he means that the map is the *sum of the new information* organized in the territory. Information is transformed or coded as it travels around the circuit. The resultant information is a combination of all the parts interacting on the initial difference.

The response of the circuit is graded according to the magnitude of trigger event and amount of collateral energy available. The response is also set in motion regardless of the amount of difference or collateral energy available. In one case, reading may involve taking information and putting it into storage. Yet in another, reading may conjure up emotion. The complexity or the nature of the original difference may or may not result in a proportionate flow of energy (Bateson, 1979).

Families also develop coded sequences or patterns of behavior. Rules may be developed by who sets preference. Changes in the family life cycle will cause a systems

change throughout the loop. Families can go with the flow or resist. As information is passed throughout the loop new information will develop or get stuck. The family is like a three phase motor and when any phase is missing it will stall. Family members are integral parts of the whole. Information and interaction between the members keep the system flowing. Changes and differences introduced into the circuit move throughout and help the family life cycle. A family centered around an alcoholic individual, will have a characteristically rigid regulatory mechanism. This family has a tendency to set their internal thermostat at an inappropriately narrow range (Steinglass, 1987). Even the slightest environmental or developmental change will incite a rapid negative feedback response that maintains status quo. Rule number one is for the family, at all costs, to not upset the alcoholic from his/her drinking.

The name Alcoholics Anonymous suggests that no one member represents the whole. The map is not the territory. AA is made of many members with different backgrounds, ideologies, cultures, viewpoints, and social status. Anonymity suggest that the alcoholic have differences and similarities and still be a part of the whole. Anonymous suggests that members stay out of the limelight, yet still carry the message to those suffering. AA's co-founder Bill W. would write, in his essay on the Twelfth Tradition: "The spiritual substance of anonymity is sacrifice. Because AA's Twelve Traditions repeatedly ask us to give up personal desires for the common good, we realize that the sacrificial spirit-- well symbolized by anonymity-- is the foundation of them all. It is AA's proved willingness to make these sacrifices that gives people their high confidence in our future (AA World Service, Inc, 1984)." Anonymity suggests that every single member of AA is equal. Anonymity creates equality.

The closed AA group represents the holistic movements active positive feedback with ritualistic encouragement toward a sober lifestyle. A newcomer to AA may refuse to admit defeat, powerlessness, unmanageability, a source of strength greater than themselves, readiness, willingness and that the AA group can help them do what they have not been able to do by themselves, they are still welcome. The newcomer can hardly deny responsibility when they are continuously showered/bombarded with evidence to the contrary. The alcoholic is responsible for his/her sobriety. If she/he chooses to return to drinking, her/his life is getting screwed and she/he is holding the "screwdriver." The AA group provides positive feedback that stabilizes sobriety.

## **The Description And Classification Of These Processes Of Transformation Discloses A Hierarchy Of Logical Types Immanent In The Phenomena**

The theory of logical typing-- or what Bateson refers to as metamessages-- is the discrimination between two levels of communication. It is the last criteria needed to complete systemic, communications and cybernetic thinking. The first level consists of simple action or direct word content. The second level is the meaning or explanation behind the content. A zebra sees a lion. It is dead meat and makes a beeline for the hills. The lion mayor may not be hungry. The zebra seeing the lion triggers a first order message. The information circulates through the system very quickly. The zebra's metabolism and survival instinct add to the message. The original message is transformed and coded as it circulates through the loop and the zebra starts to run because now the metamessage is, "lions eat

zebras.” The zebra would be foolish to try and figure out what the second order message coming from the lion was. In human behavior, levels of communication is important because lack of discrimination has led to distortion and confusion, frustration and pathology.

Bateson observed the metacommunication in families that developed schizophrenia. In most cases the parent failed to discriminate between first and second levels of communication. The typical scenario involved a parent signaling for the child to come closer. As the child approaches, the parent begins to feel anxiety but shows a pseudo love instead. The child responds to the second level of communication, the anxiety, and withdraws. The parent fails to differentiate the second order anxiety and blames the child for not loving. This is a double bind. The child cannot love because it induces anxiety in the parent. The child cannot leave the field without being blamed for not loving. The crazy making pattern happens time and time again. Imagine if the zebra had to figure out if the lion was hungry, Virginia Satir worked with a metacommunications style in family therapy (Satir, 1988). Incongruence between verbal and non-verbal communication produce double messages. The first logical level, words, say one thing, while the second order, body language means something else. Again, this amounts to a double bind or crazy making behavior. Direct communication occurs in a family when perceptions, thinking and feelings are congruent.

---

*Direct communication occurs in a family when perceptions, thinking and feelings are congruent. This means that the transmitter and receiver are in tune with both logical levels of communication. This means that the transmitter and receiver are in tune with both logical levels of communication.*

---

This means that the transmitter and receiver are in tune with both logical levels of communication. Satir used communication as a gauge by which two people measure each other's worth. Communication is the link that determines relationships, what happens to each other in the world, survival, intimacy, how productive one is, and the connection between oneself, others and mother nature. Sense organs are used to decipher the first order of communications. A message is received by the senses. It travels along the loop and is influenced by past experience, such as, parents, authority figures and books. The ability to discriminate the second order of logical typing or coding allows the total human being to develop.

Alcoholics have made a second order change in the way they relate to the universe. Once their symmetrical relationship caused them many hardships. In humility, they found a power greater than themselves with which they can have a complimentary relationship. They no longer are at war with the bottle. Now there is peace and serenity in helping other alcoholics. Cybernetic thinking can be applied to minds, families, AA, the solar system, evolution, and all living organisms. Systems is part of society and the way in which society communicates. Systems create the universe. Relationships establish the entire personality. A longing for life itself within energizes an outward thrust for contact. This information generates a vibrating chord that traverses the totality of a system. Like the AA cliché states, “you have to give it away to keep it.”

## REFERENCES

- Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind*. NY: Ballantine.
- Bateson, G. (1979) *Mind and nature: a necessary unity*, Dutton, NY
- Satir, V. (1988) *The New Peoplemaking*, Mountain View, CA: Science and Behavior Books.
- Wegsneider Cruse, (1989), *Another chance*. Palo Alto: CA: Science and Behavior Books.
- Steinglass, P. (1987) *The alcoholic family*. BasicBooks, NY, NY
- Rogers, C. (1961) *On becoming a person*, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Papp, P. (1983) *The process of change*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Worden, M (1994) *Family therapy basics*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Alcoholics Anonymous World Service. (1952) *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*. NY: AA World Service Inc.
- Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, (1939), *Alcoholics Anonymous*. NY: AAWorld Service.

## **Policy Statement**

The Person-Centered Journal is sponsored by the Association for Development of the Person-Centered Approach (ADPCA). The publication is intended to promote and disseminate scholarly thinking about person-centered principles, practices, and philosophy.

All materials contained in The Person-Centered Journal are the property of the ADPCA, which grants reproduction permission to libraries, researchers, and teachers to copy all or part of the materials in this issue for scholarly purposes with the stipulation that no fee for profit be charged to the consumer for the use or possession of such copies.