SEMINAR DAY 4

A Note on the Double Bind—1962

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BECAUSE OF THE REACTION in the literature to the concept of the double bind as presented in our joint article "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," it seems appropriate to state briefly the research context of that article, to clarify what we consider most significant about our work generally, and to describe the further developments in our research since 1956.

Prior to the 1956 paper the research project had investigated a variety of phenomena from the communication point of view—the nature of metaphor, humor, popular films, ventriloquism, training of guide dogs for the blind, the nature of play, animal behavior, the formal nature of psychotherapy and the communicative behavior of individual schizophrenics (1, 2, 30). All communication involves the use of categories and classes, and our focus of interest was on the occurrence in classification systems of combinations which generate paradox; a particular interest was in the ways two or more messages—meta-messages in relation to each other—may qualify each other to produce paradoxes of Russellian type.

Originally the idea of the double bind was arrived at largely deductively: given the characteristics of schizophrenic communication—a confusion of message and meta-message in the patient's discourse—the patient must have been reared in a learning context which included formal sequences where he was forced to respond to messages which

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generated paradox of this type. In this sense the double bind hypothesis was initially a conjecture about what must have happened granted the premises of the theoretical approach and the observations of the schizophrenic individual's way of communicating. By 1956 this conjecture was beginning to be supported by empirical observation of mothers and their disturbed children.

However, although our investigations thus involved various fields of phenomena, and the particular concept of the double bind was a striking one—as attested by the specific attention that both we and others have given it—neither these specific subject-matters nor this specific concept has been the real core of our work as we see it. This point needs special attention, as it seems that a number of existing criticisms or misunderstandings of our statements rest on a lack of clarity at just this level.

A COMMUNICATIONAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF BEHAVIOR

What is more important in our work, and may not have been sufficiently emphasized or clear in our 1956 paper, is a general communicational approach to the study of a wide range of human (and some animal) behavior, including schizophrenia as one major case. The present and future status of the more specific double bind concept can appropriately be considered only within this, its more general and inclusive framework. This communicational approach might be described or characterized in various ways, as it has been in other of our publications. It will suffice here to note that we are always concerned when examining the activity of people (or other organisms) to consider how this behavior may be in response to observable communications from others, and how it in turn itself is communicative. Especially, we have been concerned with the importance of attending adequately to the complexity of communication. That is, there is never "a message" singly, but in actual communication always two or more related messages, of different levels and often conveyed by different channels—voice, tone, movement, context, and so on. These messages may be widely incongruent and thus exert very different and conflicting influences. This approach seems to us to be helpful when we try to examine and conceptualize many sorts of social or psychological problems, and we have continued to pursue and extend its application.

Since 1956 when "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia" appeared, the

project members have published papers on a variety of areas of investigation. These papers are listed here with reference numbers referring to items in the bibliography at the end of this article. The publications are arranged roughly by subject matter although many of them included overlapping subjects.

1. Schizophrenic Communication and the Nature of Schizophrenia

The distortions of schizophrenic communication were discussed (6), a subjective account of a psychosis was presented (16) and schizophrenic behavior was described in terms of levels of communication (34).

2. The Family Context as an Etiologic Factor and a Subject of Study in Itself

The etiology of schizophrenia was discussed in terms of the mother as a factor (27), trauma vs. patterns (45), and there was a description of the immediate circumstances of a schizophrenic episode (65).

The families of schizophrenics were described in terms of feedback and calibration patterns (15), the family was described as a cybernetic system (35, 36), guilt and its relation to maternal control was discussed (50), and letters of mothers to their schizophrenic children were described (70).

Family organization and dynamics were discussed with reference to incest (9), patterns (15), family homeostasis (52), three-party interaction in double bind communication (66), the relationship between an anxiety syndrome and a marital relationship (28), experimentation with families (41) and family therapy as an arena for research (69).

3. Therapy

A report on investigating therapy was given (15), the detailed study of a therapeutic interview was provided (22), psychoanalysis was described in communications terms (31, 33), transference was discussed in terms of paradox (63), brief psychotherapy was described (38) as well as psychotherapy with schizophrenics (39) and family therapy (40, 52, 56, 58, 59, 64).

4. Hypnosis in Communication Terms

A description of the interaction of hypnotist and subject was made (32), an analysis was done of a verbatim trance induction (23), the relief of fear with hypnosis was discussed (37), and hypnosis was discussed as a model for describing psychotherapy (38).

5. Wider Studies of Communication and Organization

Various general areas of investigation included studies of hospital wards (7, 15), wider social spheres (5, 10, 20), a detailed analysis of an interview segment (22), levels of learning (17, 18), the Theory of Games was discussed (11, 13, 15) and evolution was described in terms of communication and double bind patterns (12).

The research project terminated in 1962 after ten years of association. A summary statement of the group agreement about the double bind at the time of termintion would include the following: I. The double bind is a class of sequences which appear when phenomena are examined with a concept of levels of communication. II. In schizophrenia the double bind is a necessary but not sufficient condition in explaining etiology and, conversely, is an inevitable by-product of schizophrenic communication. III. Empirical study and theoretical description of individuals and families should for this type of analysis emphasize observable communication, behavior, and relationship contexts rather than focusing upon the perception or affective states of individuals. IV. The most useful way to phrase double bind description is not in terms of a binder and a victim but in terms of people caught up in an ongoing system which produces conflicting definitions of the relationship and consequent subjective distress. In its attempts to deal with the complexities of multi-level patterns in human communications systems, the research group prefers an emphasis upon circular systems of interpersonal relations to a more conventional emphasis upon the behavior of individuals alone or single sequences in the interaction.

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