

Bateson: What Every Schoolboy Doesn't Know

Family therapy came into being as a result of a bold 'leap' from cybernetic theory and communication theory to the pragmatic, difficult business of trying to help families manage unwelcome change in their midst. Family therapy's early days saw a hugely creative partnership between theorists (most notably, English anthropologist Gregory Bateson) and several radical psychiatrists who had become equally disillusioned with the psychodynamic model (interminable analysis for the patient, no change for the family) and with its simplistic behavioural alternatives.

Even then, there was a tension evident between practitioners like Jay Haley and Don Jackson, eager to start applying the mind-blowing possibilities of the new theory to real, suffering human beings, and the more academic theorists, like Bateson himself, who later publicly said (as Joel Cullin reminds us) that the 'double bind theory' of schizophrenia had been rushed into print prematurely. Those involved with Bateson's research project were highly intelligent, creative individuals; and like others from family therapy's early days (Murray Bowen, Nathan Ackerman, Sal Minuchin, Virginia Satir and Carl Whitaker) went on to achieve high professional status in their own right, lending their names to influential Schools of family therapy practice.

We no longer breathe the heady air of the 1960s, but family therapy's leaders have continued to search for new scientific and philosophical paradigms that might liberate them from the constraints of biological determinism, psychoanalytic developmental theory, 'evidence based' cognitive restructuring, and the rest, which have left suffering human beings fundamentally unchanged. Batesonian communication theory was (briefly) succeeded by Maturana's biologically-rooted systems perspective, challenged by feminism, and then swept away by the rising wave of constructivist and postmodern thought, which offered family therapy a way of recreating itself as a moral, rather than a scientific, enterprise.

The 'moral turn' is well represented in this issue by Alan Jenkins' article on restorative justice, a thoughtful critique of conventional thinking about 'apologies', 'making amends' and 'forgiveness'. Implicit in Jenkins' approach is the need not to be caught up in the abuser's urgent wish to be forgiven, but to allow space to the anguished feelings of those he has abused. This is an ethical proposal; it is also a systemic one.

Jenkins' first case vignette, drawn from a school counselling context, is another excellent example of system

intervention. Where the counsellor, and the school administration, had conceived a boy's brutal and humiliating assault on a girl as a problem to be dealt with by individual counselling, Jenkins is able to persuade the school that this event not only *affects* the whole school community, but also *reflects* a whole-school culture of unquestioned assumptions.

Too often, however, postmodernism simply meant that therapists rushed to embrace the fashionable new theory, the fashionable new buzzword, on somebody's say-so, without asking the hard questions: can this body of theory really be transferred so easily from its discipline of origin (anthropology, cognitive science, new physics) to family therapy? Do we pluralise 'knowledges', 'co-create' everything 'with' our clients, or self-consciously change our 'lenses', because we really understand the force of those words, or out of fear that if we don't, we may be labelled slaves to Grand Theory, colluders with violence, or cold, Mengele-like 'experts' carrying out our dubious 'experiments' without respect or scruples?

In 1985, I remember Michael White asking at one of his workshops why anyone would rush into new theories and models, when there was still so much to be understood from Bateson. Although he himself must have thought better of that advice, it seemed to me to have much to commend it, and still does. In this issue, Andrew Gunner takes one concept from cybernetic theory (feedback loops) and shows how it can be applied rigorously to the process of problem gambling, simultaneously demonstrating how this concept can bring together a range of different modalities and approaches. Systems theory makes sense of things that otherwise appear 'separate'.

Bateson was a polymathic genius, and his body of work contains more penetrating, revelatory thinking about the key dilemmas that afflict human beings (schizophrenia, addictive processes, escalating marital conflicts) than any of the later theorists on whom we family therapists have so glibly drawn in the last twenty years. As Brian Staggoll's superbly readable introductory essay shows, Bateson was not an armchair anthropologist, but a real one, not a reader of popular science, but a real scientist; when he transferred concepts and metaphors from one discipline to another, he knew what he was doing. Trained in positivism, he transcended it. When Bateson drew attention to the way that that arbitrary 'cutting up of the continuous stream' of experience gave rise to completely illusory concepts of 'cause' and 'effect', he was in

fact striking a blow at the empire of positivism and modernism — something that postmodern theorists seem to have forgotten.

But Bateson was unwilling to dissolve everything into meaninglessness and relativism, and would lecture on ‘What every schoolboy knows’. We can forgive him the sexism (he was of his time). More to the point, we can heed his call to attend to basics —something that Ron Perry has reminded us of, during his long career in counselling and family therapy in this country. If empathy had not temporarily ceased to be ‘at the heart of family therapy’, if we had not temporarily lost that sense of ‘the dialectical struggle with uncertainty, confusion, and doubt, sometimes despair’ that John Hills mentions on p. 172, then perhaps we would not have needed the sharpness of the critique of the 1980s, and Bateson would not have sunk below the horizon for many of today’s family therapy trainees.

If too many of the first generation of family therapists were intent on the narrow application of ‘techniques’ and ‘change strategies’, then too many of the second genera-

tion ran headlong away from the slightest hint that they, as therapists, might actually have power (whether they believed they did or not). Similarly, the generation of the 1990s often wanted to deny that they possessed expertise that their clients did not, and that they might sometimes hold ‘truths’ about the good life, or right conduct, despite postmodern deconstruction of such ‘hegemonic assumptions’.

Gregory Bateson, as we know, deeply disapproved of the hasty, instrumental use to which his ideas were put by family therapists; he would also have been deeply suspicious of those who sought to deny any stable meaning or pattern in the world of Mind. Re-reading his work reminds us of how small our minds actually are, how incapable of grasping that ‘context’ extends beyond family and community, to our entire planet. How sad when family therapists grumble that papers like Des Casey’s ‘Therapy for an Exhausted Planet’ (*ANZJFT* 21, 4, 2000) is ‘not family therapy’! Bateson would have known better.

Hugh Crago

Relationships Australia

Enrolling Now for 2007



Graduate Certificate in Clinical Supervision and Consultation

course commences March 2007

Graduate Diploma of Systemic Therapy (Couple and Family Therapy)

course commences February 2007

Graduate Certificate in Mediation

course commences October 2006, February 2007

Training by
Experienced
Professionals

These postgraduate courses are higher education accredited with the NSW Department of Education and Training. For more information please contact us on 9806 3288 or visit our website www.relationships.com.au

