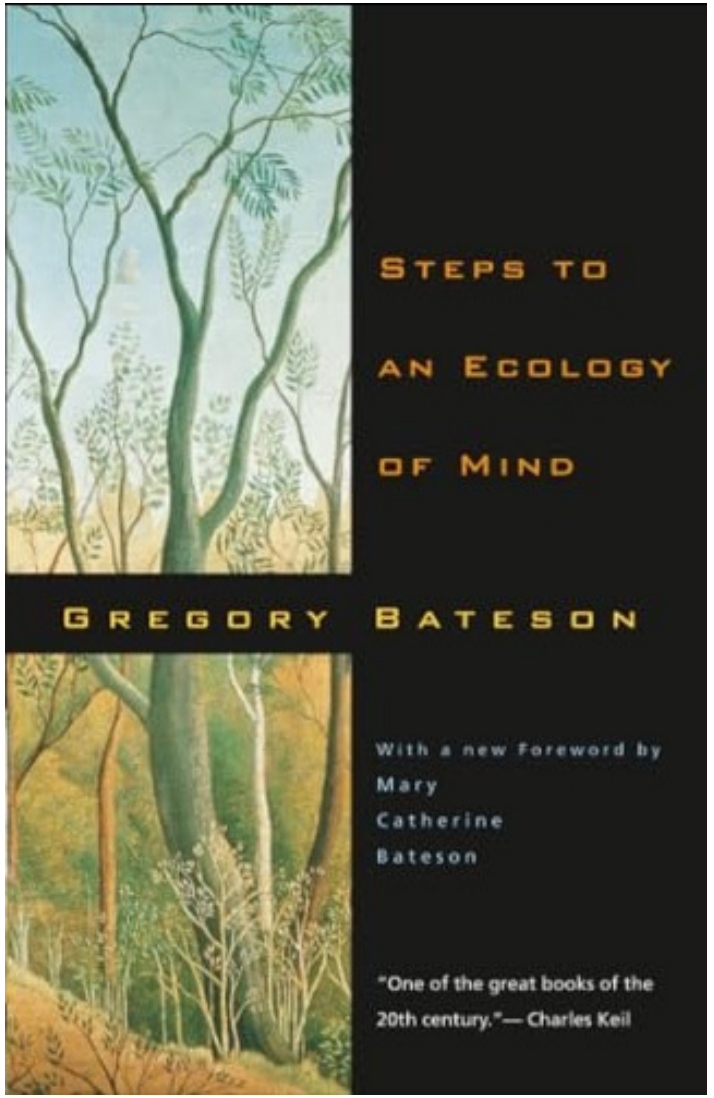
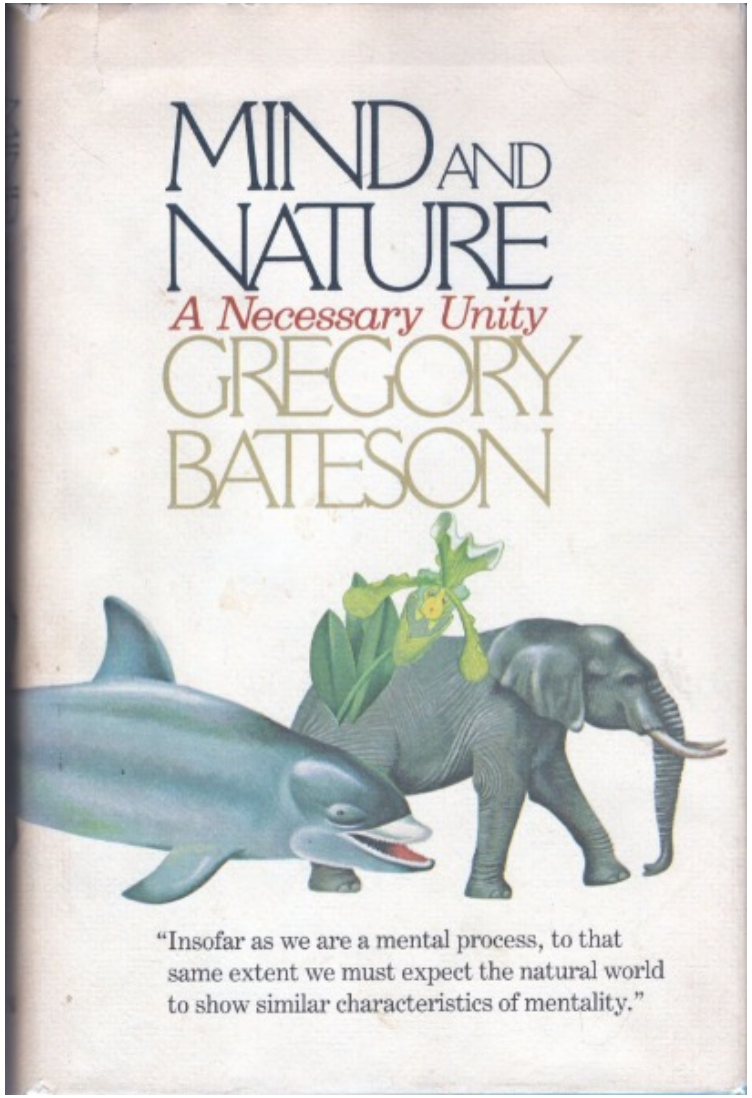
Double Binds, Health Systems Change, and Action Research

Dr. Dulmini Perera, May 2026

Gregory Bateson, change, theory of action, design







When the map is not the territory

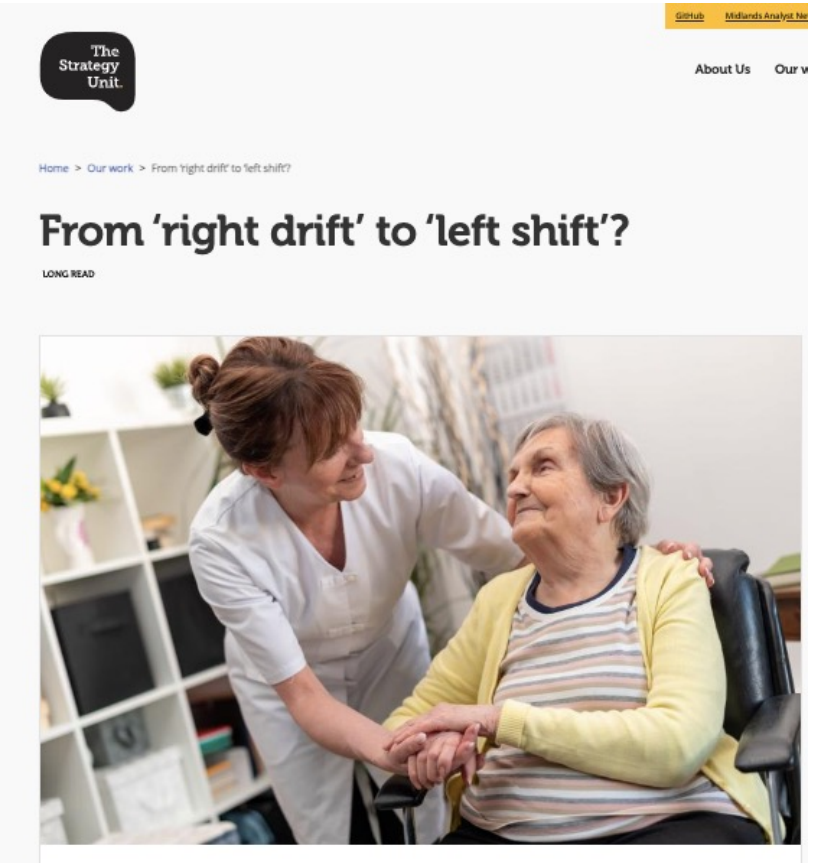


Image source: https://www.strategyunitwm.nhs.uk/news/right-drift-left-shift/

health systems "shifts" and double binds

transitions, transformation, stuckness, a theory of change

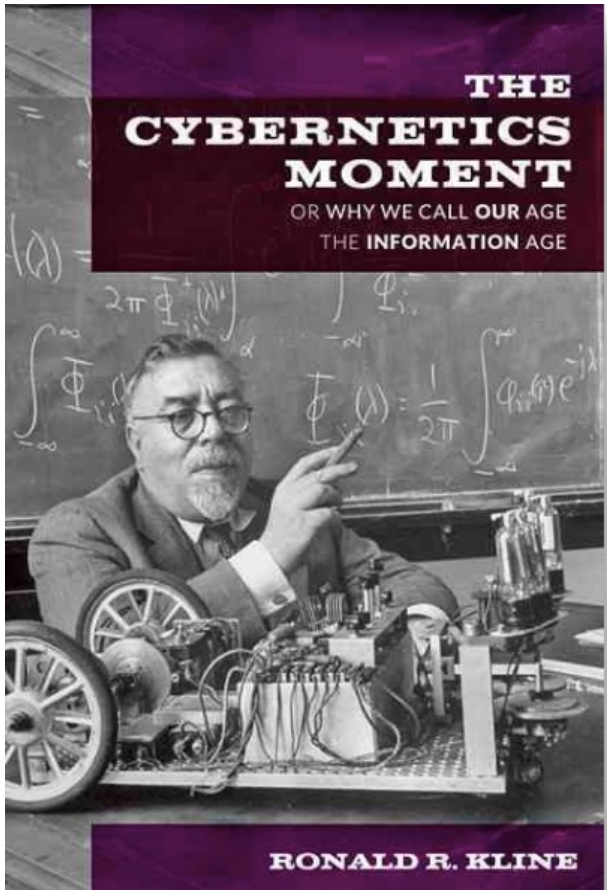
My presentation has three parts:

1. Bateson's living systems research (a theory of change)
2. The double bind
3. A discussion: on systems change and navigating double binds

General context : Bateson’s research on living systems change

Two systems theoretical frameworks for thinking about change

mechanical systems



living systems



Gregory and Nora Bateson with pet gibbon, Hawaii, 1970. *Photo courtesy the Bateson Idea Group*

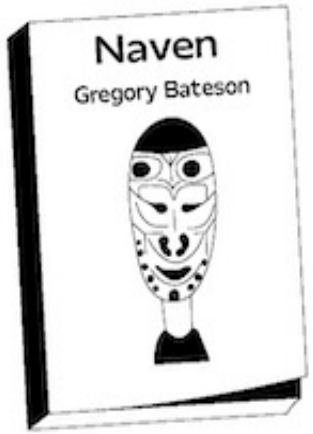
Tim Parks is a British author, translator and essayist. He has written 14 novels, the latest of which is *In Extremis* (2017), and has translated works by Italo Calvino, Niccolò Machiavelli and Giacomo Leopardi, among others. His nonfiction books include *Out of My Head: On the Trail of Consciousness* (2018) and *Dialogues on Consciousness* (2020), co-authored with Riccardo Manzotti. He lives in Milan, Italy.

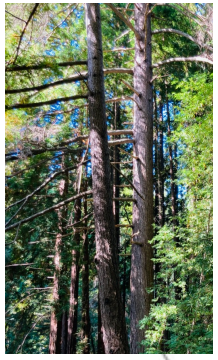
There are times when a dilemma that seems like agony in adolescence can not only provide the basis for a prestigious career, but also lead to a profound shift in the world of ideas. Thus it is that the predicament faced by the 17-year-old Gregory Bateson, following his brother's suicide in 1922, turns out to be extremely relevant to us today, for it eventually led him to revolutionise the study of anthropology, bring communication theory to psychoanalysis (thus undermining the Freudian model), invent the concept of the 'double bind', and make one of the first coherent, scientifically and philosophically argued pleas for a holistic approach to the world's environmental crisis. Seeking to condense Bateson's work into one core concept, one can say that, above all, he proposed a paradigm shift in the way

Source: https://aeon.co/essays/gregory-bateson-changed-the-way-we-think-about-changing-ourselves

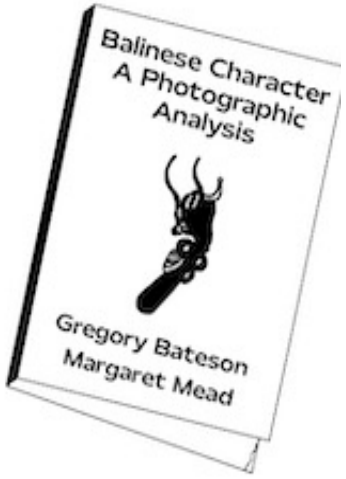
1. Is there a pattern that connects ?

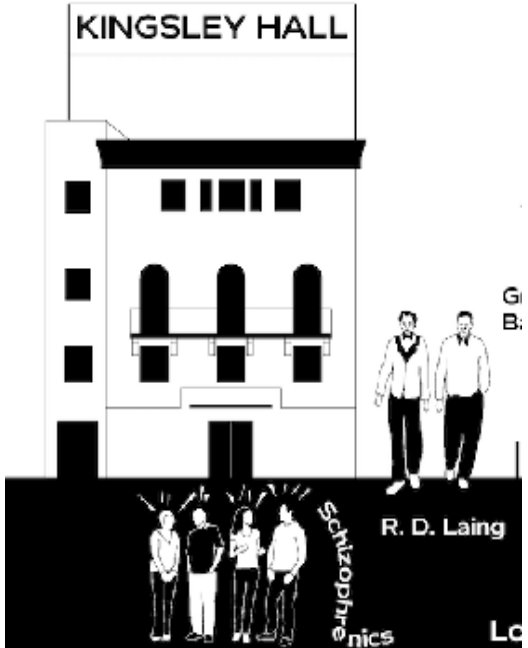
A theory based on observing change—disorder, breakdowns, and learning—in the living world, from the personal level to the planetary scale.

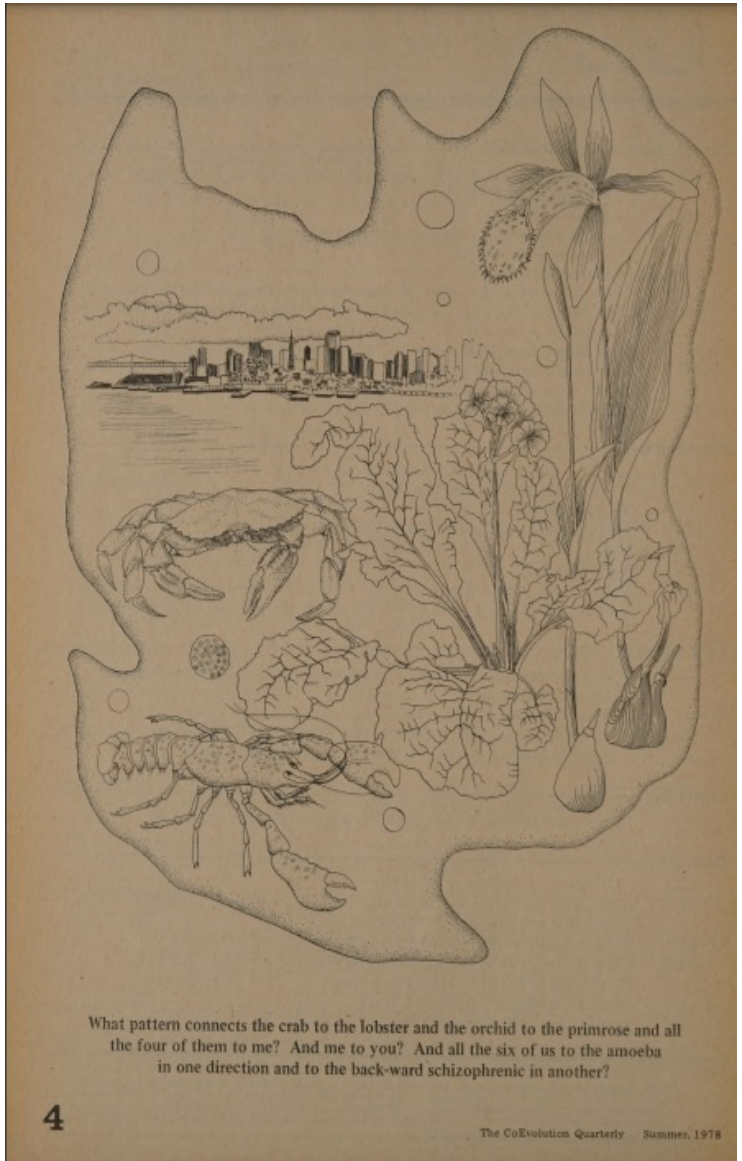


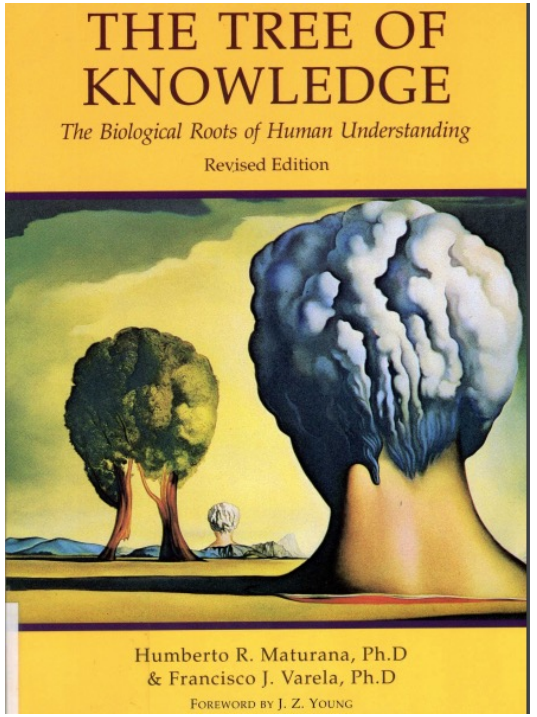



Algae bloom on Lake Erie in 2011 MERIS/NASA











2. Breakdowns in commnuicative order is a way of understanding disorders in living systems (a forest, a bee colony, a public service organisation, a person).

Biosemiotics (2009) 2:193–204
DOI 10.1007/s12304-009-9044-6

ORIGINAL PAPER

Honeybees, Communicative Order, and the Collapse of Ecosystems

Peter Harries-Jones

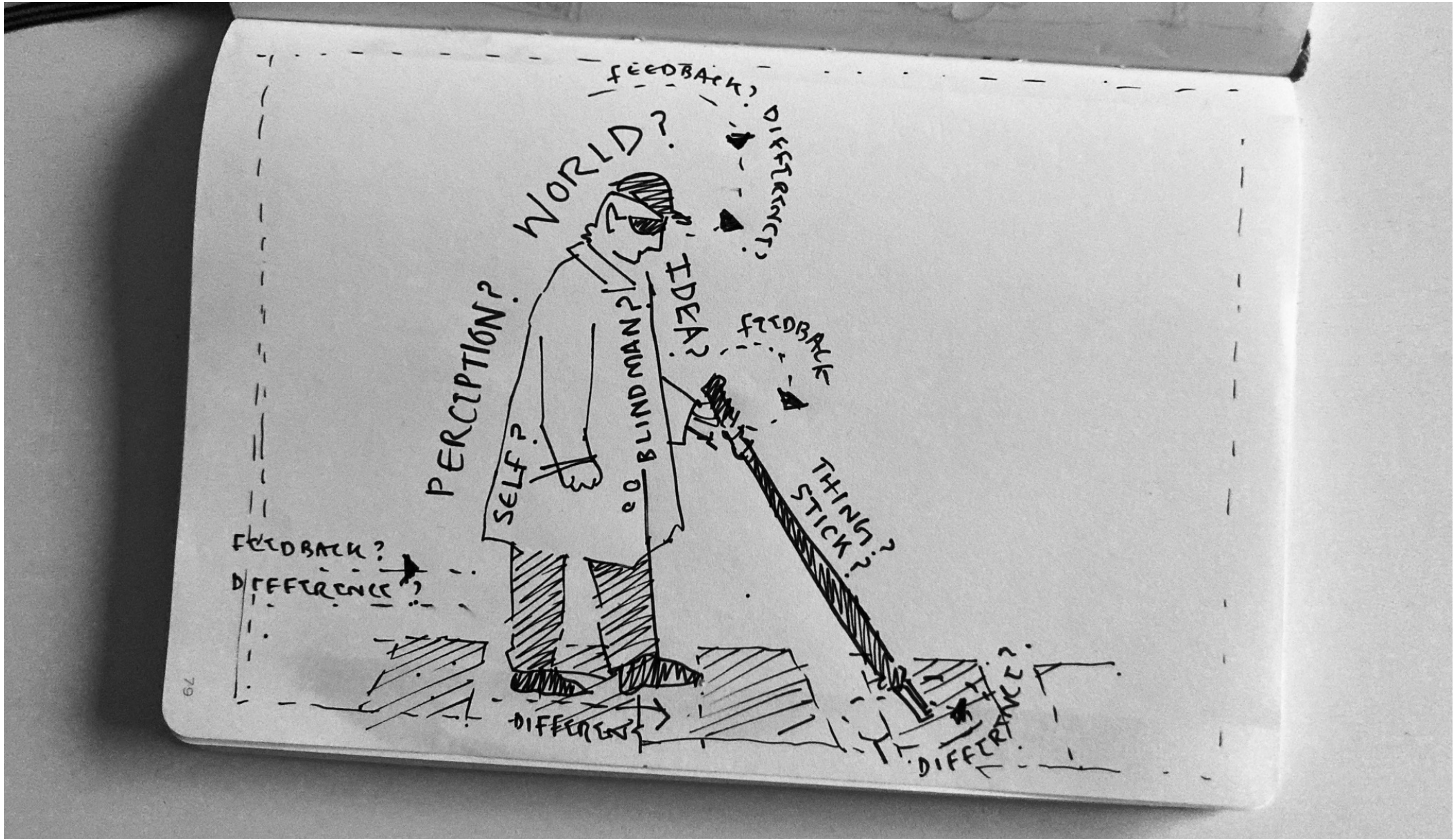
Received: 3 September 2008 / Accepted: 22 January 2009 /
Published online: 13 May 2009
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Abstract The paper examines the sudden disappearance in the United States of millions of honeybees in managed bee colonies. The major research undertaken in the U.S. concentrates on finding the pathogens responsible. This paper suggests an alternative avenue of research a) that as a result of global warming there is a disjunction between bees pollinating cycles and the life cycle of plants b) that understanding changes in "timing cycles" as a result of global warming is the key to understanding the disappearance of the bees. It notes that Gregory Bateson argued that any condition of ecosystem collapse would be characterized first by a collapse in its communicative order rather, than from changed physical states. The collapse of bee colonies and demise of other pollinators is a seeming confirmation of Gregory Bateson argument. Honeybees are 'go betweens' in ecosystemic order. It also argues that an appropriate topology of timing cycles and their recursions would enable better visual comprehension of the heterarchical 'pattern which connects', in Bateson's phrase, and prompt awareness of possible catastrophe in human food supplies.

Keywords Communication · Honeybee-plant recursions · Sterile nectar · Go-betweens in ecosystems · Gregory Bateson · Don McNeil · Topology of timing cycles



3. Where does the self end and the world begin ? Where does thinking end and action begin ?





Algae bloom on Lake Erie in 2011 MERIS/NASA

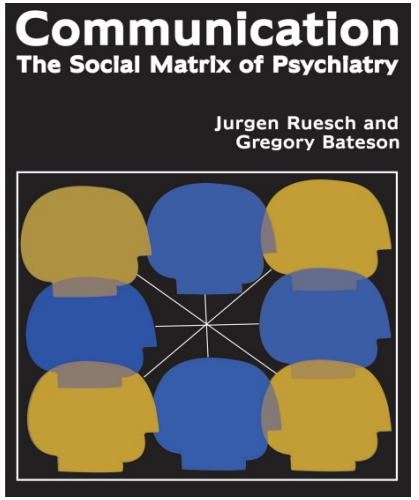
4. Alice's strange croquet game and the limits of purposive action



Double bind

Double bind research: a history





Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia*

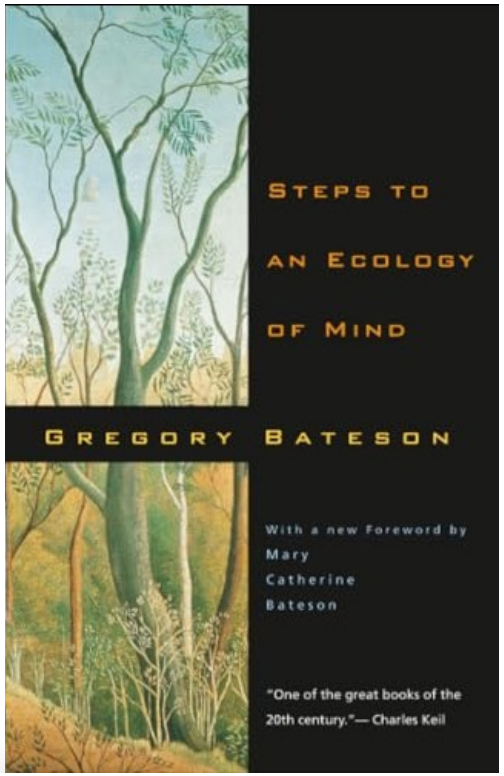
Schizophrenia—its nature, etiology, and the kind of therapy to use for it—remains one of the most puzzling of the mental illnesses. The theory of schizophrenia presented here is based on communications analysis, and specifically on the Theory of Logical Types. From this theory and from observations of schizophrenic patients is derived a description, and the necessary conditions for, a situation called the "double bind"—a situation in which no matter what a person does, he "can't win." It is hypothesized that a person caught in the double bind may develop schizophrenic symptoms. How and why the double bind may arise in a family situation is discussed, together with illustrations from clinical and experimental data.

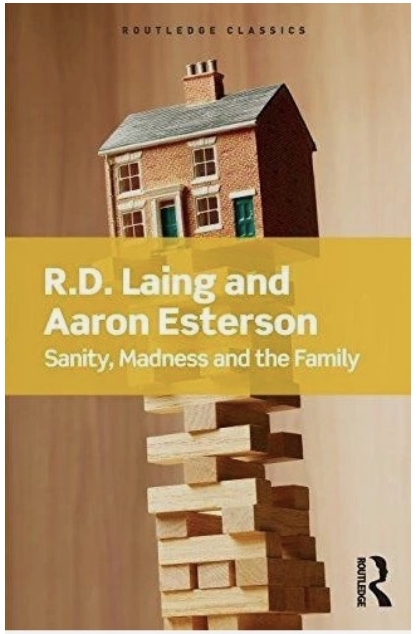
This is a report[24] on a research project which has been formulating and testing a broad, systematic view of the nature, etiology, and therapy of schizophrenia. Our research in this field has proceeded by discussion of a varied body of data and ideas, with all of us contributing according to our varied experience in anthropology, communications analysis, psychotherapy, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. We have now

* This paper by Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, and John H. Weakland is here reproduced from *Behavioral Science*, Vol. I, *No.* 4, 1956, by permission of *Behavioral Science*

[24] This paper derives from hypotheses first developed in a research project financed by the Rockfeller Foundation from 1952-54, administered by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Stanford University and directed by Gregory Bateson. Since 1954 the project has financed by the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation. To Jay Haley is due credit for recognizing that the symptoms of schizophrenia are suggestive of an inability to discriminate the Logical Types, and this was amplified by Bateson, who added the notion that the symptoms and etiology could be formally described in terms of a double bind hypothesis. The hypothesis was communicated to D. D. Jackson and found to fit closely with his ideas of family homeostasis. Since then Dr. Jackson has worked closely with the project. The study of the formal analogies between hypnosis and schizophrenia has been the work of John H. Weakland and Jay Haley.

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Double bind: a story

“Let me give you the well known example of a young man who had been in hospital and was somewhat recovered from an acute schizophrenic episode when he was visited by his mother. Gregory’s account of the event: “He was glad to see her and impulsively put his arm around her shoulders, whereupon she stiffened. He withdrew his arm and she asked, ‘Don’t you love me any more?’ He then blushed, and she said, ‘Dear, you must not be so easily embarrassed and afraid of your feelings.’ The patient was able to stay with her only a few minutes more, and following her departure he assaulted an aide and was put in the tubs”

(Mary Catherine Bateson, The double bind: pathology and creativity, 2005, pg 13)

Double bind: a definition

"The **double bind is created in interaction between two or more parties or entities** (I'm deliberately avoiding saying 'persons' here, which is the usual phrasing—really we are dealing with parts of some larger whole) in a significant non-transient **relationship that continues over an extended period**, with the same pattern repeated again and again. **In this pattern** there is a **contradiction between messages at different logical levels**: a primary injunction and a second conflicting injunction at another level affecting the interpretation of the first."

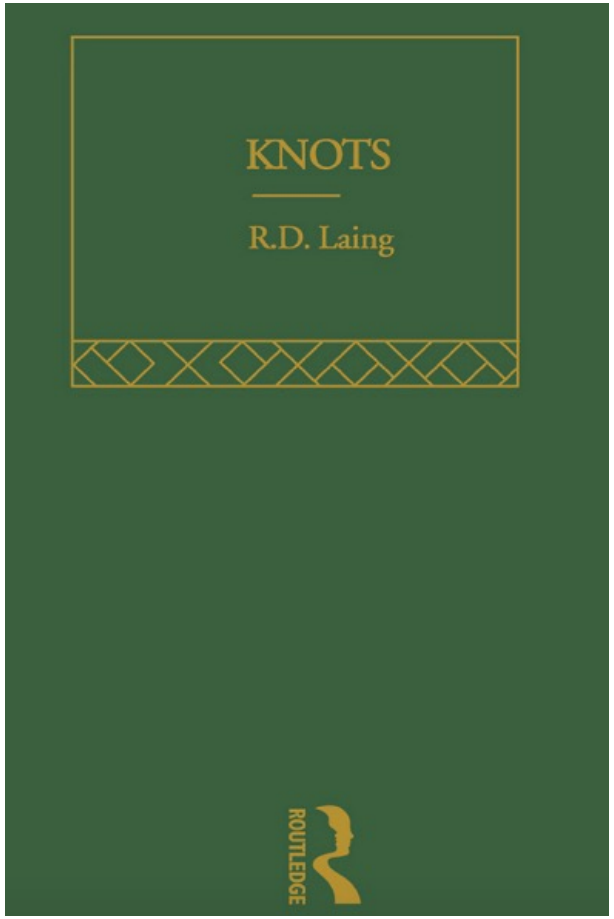
(Mary Catherine Bateson, The double bind: pathology and creativity, 2005, pg 13)

Double binds within health systems change (Discussion)

Think about contradictions between the social context of policy vs. financial context of policy

Think about contradictions between planning/policy realities vs. personal realities

Double binds within health systems change

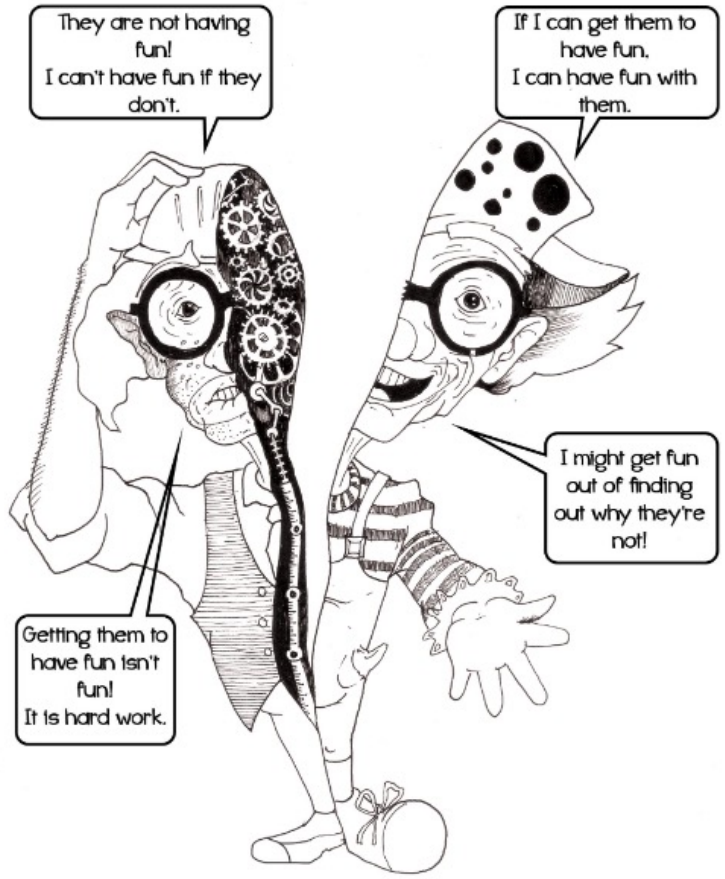


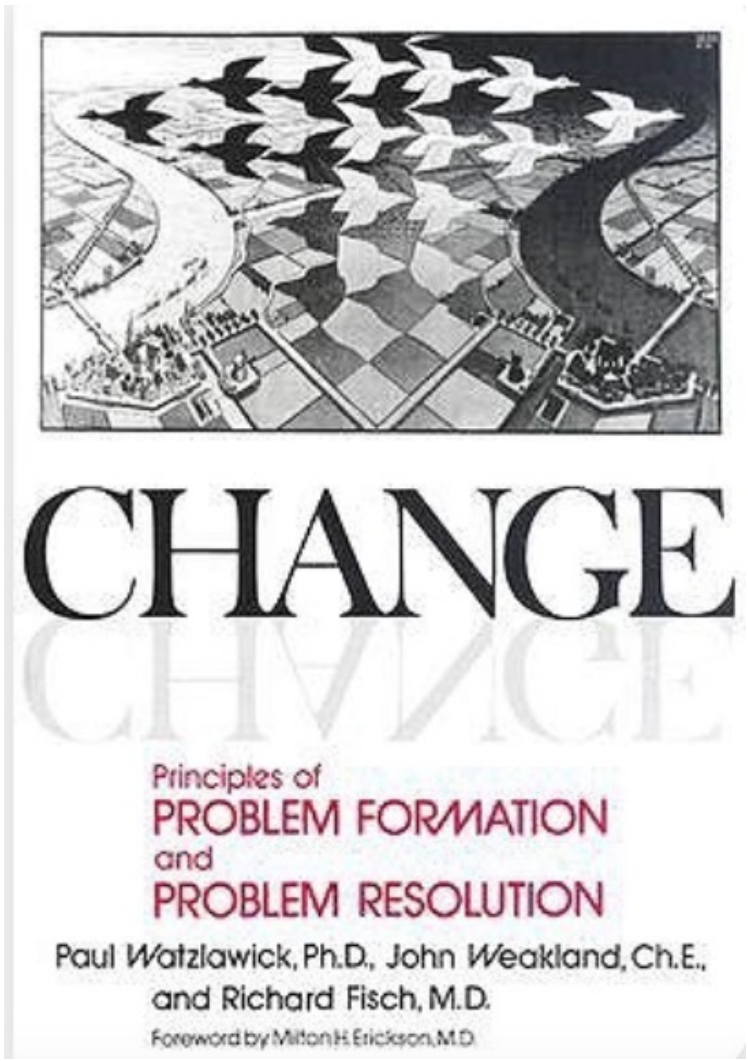
1

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me.

I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.

They are not having fun.
I can't have fun if they don't.
If I get them to have fun, then I can have fun with them.
Getting them to have fun, is not fun. It is hard work.





The Double Bind as a Universal Pathogenic Situation†

CARLOS E. SLUZKI M. D, ELISEO VERÓN Ph.D.

First published: December 1971 | https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1971.00397.x |

VIEW METRICS

† Paper delivered by the first author to the First Argentine Congress of Family Psychopathology, June 19, 1970, Buenos Aires (translated by Paul Watzlawick, Ph.D.).

Read the full text >

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Abstract

In this report we have tried to propose specific models for the genesis of three types of neurosis (i.e., hysteric, phobic, and obsessive-compulsive). We believe that this approach, based on a conceptual reconstruction of the specific learning contexts and experiences of an individual, is applicable to the study of the other functional disturbances as well. A central position is assigned in this to the ubiquity of double-bind phenomena which are assumed to be of greater importance than previously believed.

Cybernetics And Human Knowing. Vol. 12, nos. 1-2, pp. 11-21

The Double Bind:
Pathology and Creativity

Mary Catherine Bateson[1]

The double bind is a recurrent characteristic of life, not limited to the context of psychopathology, where the concept was first developed within the narrowed focus of Bateson's work during his period in Palo Alto. Bateson pointed out that it is not appropriate or possible to count double binds: it is also not appropriate or possible to prevent their occurrence. Instead, we should ask why some individuals are particularly vulnerable and how education can strengthen individuals to deal with multiple logical levels.

Discussion

Some cases, stories

How does this relate to the way we think about systems change?

Pathology or creativity? Playfully navigating the edge of change

Contexts and “relational” information

Discomfort / a sense of stuckness, but difficult to articluate

Logical levels of communication, learning to deal with multiple levels

Meta-communication frames, framing to reframe

pathological adpatation (vicious repetition of patterns, breaking “tacit contracts”)

Discussion

The Model of Logical Paradox: Addressing design and double-bind communication in public services

Linda Blaasvær, Tore Gulden, and Fredric Steier

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) | Oslo Metropolitan University | University of South Florida

This article introduces an understanding of double-bind communication based on cybernetic theory. It describes how a synthesised model of logical paradoxes can serve as a means for the system analysis of the double-bind communication inherent in the relationship between clients and service providers in public services. The study is positioned in the context of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). A double bind can be described as communication that is paradoxical in contexts where, for example, the client (in this study, the citizen seeking help in difficult life situations) encounters the dimensions of being disciplined and helped as two facets of a conversation with the service provider (in this study, a public servant representing a welfare provider).

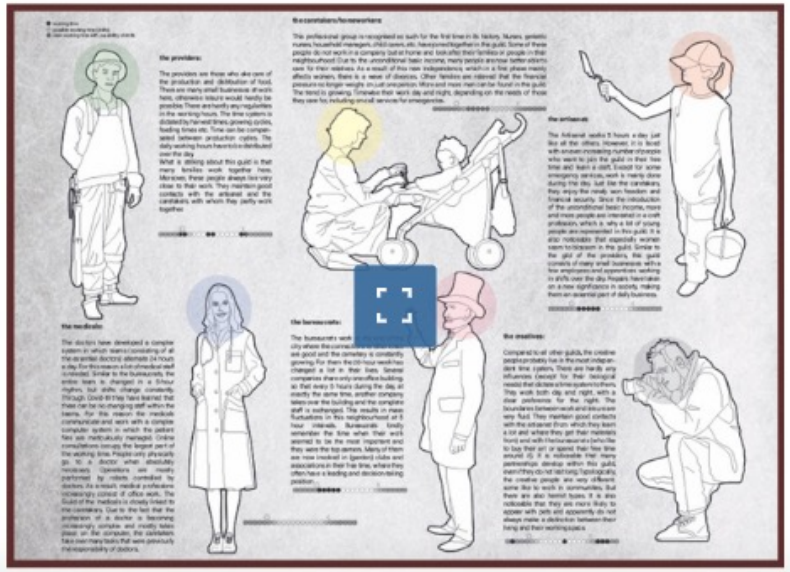
We have explored communication sequences in citizen–public servant conversations in relation to cybernetic theory and the work of G. Bateson (1972) to illustrate the research on double-bind communication. The communication examined in this ongoing study is limited to a few standardised letters created by NAV and sent to clients when support for sick leave is about to cease. Thus, the study is concerned with how to recognise and understand double-bind communication in welfare services and service design in general and, as an extension, with how this understanding can inform the process of designing a mutually trustworthy communication and the relationship between the citizen

Source: Blaasvær, L., Gulden, T., & Steier, F. (2022). The model of logical paradox: addressing design and double-bind communication in public services. *Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design*, *RSD11*. Article 179. https://rsdsymposium.org/design-and-double-bind-communication-in-public-services/

Discussion

technologies, ways of work, and measuring work time. The project *It's About Time* (Figure 2) deals with the issue of how the predominant fiction about time—or better said, capitalist time—prefigures how people relate to time and wages. This project is critical of how automating time has created faulty norms around what forms of work are considered of greater economic value than others. What does it mean to rethink work and wages where these different time measures (of farmers, caretakers, teachers, or mothers) could exist in friction and become the framework for negotiating value in other ways? What sort of an economy would such a framework that depends on benevolence and caring for each other engender (Figure 2)? The concerns and worries of multiple stakeholders influenced by post COVID changes and the relation to work time were used to create a second-order fictioning frame that invites others to rethink the fictions that formulate their relationship to work time. The game then provided a framework that provoked and encouraged multiple groups to come together: those others at home and those in the university who were simultaneously thinking about the complex relationships between time, as well as organisational systems that are used to control workers' relationship to time. While playing the game participants were able to start finding their ways (sometimes alone and sometimes as groups) towards alternative fictions about time and to explore possibilities of projects (development of alternative systems, ways of organisation) that enabled working with other time models.





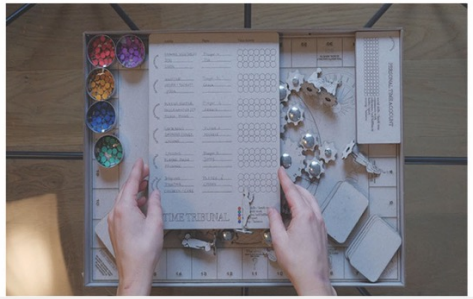


Figure 2
It's About Time, images from *It's About Time by* Zoe Pianarro. A short recording of one of the sessions conducted can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V-VNN2dgw8.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V-VNN2dgw8

Source:Perera, D. (2023) 'Design Fictioning of a Second-Order Kind: Runaway Cybernetics, Futures of Work, Possibilities of Engagement', *Enacting Cybernetics*, 1(1), 10.58695/ec.3

Discussion

A recipe

So, putting these ideas together, what could this offer us as systemic designers? A creative process, or recipe, for generating and exploring new metaphors, using the syllogism in grass[8], focused on verbs, might look something like this:

1. Start with a concept that we are seeking to explore or think about in new ways.
   example: humanity's future
2. Consider some things it "does"– what are verbs (active and passive, transitive and intransitive, obvious or potentially contested, phrases or single words) associated with the concept?
   example: humanity's future exists or will exist (even if we can't see it yet); humanity's future is plural rather than singular; humanity's future will be different to how we expect; humanity's future scares us; humanity's future motivates us.
3. What is something else (perhaps in the natural world) which shares one or more of these verbs or phrases? (it might not be its defining characteristic)
   example: underground fungal networks exist (even if we can't see them); ghosts scare us
4. Propose that one thing is a metaphor for the other (not equating them as identical, but offering a provocation).
   example: humanity's future is an underground fungal network; humanity's future is a ghost
5. Taking this as a starting point, what else does it offer as a metaphor?
   example: If humanity's future can be thought of as an underground fungal network, what might that suggest or how we approach it as a system? Perhaps we can think about our future as being more like a system which transfers resources to places (people?) in need, much like mycorrhizal networks do (Tsing, 2015)—perhaps in

[8] I previously attempted a Twitter bot, https://twitter.com/SyllogismBot, which uses the "X verbs, Y verbs, therefore X is Y" format, once per hour, to generate a random permutation, but the word/phrase lists it draws from don't actually match the nouns X/Y and the verbs in a meaningful way. Hence it produces (mostly) useless outputs such as "boxes of Q-tips bellow at you; picture frames bellow at you; therefore picture frames are boxes of Q-tips" or "candy wrappers stun with their intellect; washing machines stun with their intellect; therefore washing machines are candy wrappers" with the occasional profundity entirely by accident. This is ripe for improvement.

times of need such as climate-related disaster or social inequity. Perhaps our future involves "collaboration" with other species, as mycorrhizal networks do. Perhaps our future involves a form of decentralisation that seems strange to us now. And so on.

6. Using these new ideas and relationships as a starting point, design (or propose design), which treats these as possibilities, models, or "truths" (for want of a better word).
   example: Designing (speculative or real) food production/distribution or healthcare services around a model of transferring resources from people or places with an excess to people or places in need in times of disastrous conditions (or in anticipation of them).

And, of course, continue to iterate and modify and provoke in other ways: the idea of the recipe is that it is more like a heuristic than an algorithm. Here, I developed the "humanity's future is an underground fungal network" idea, but picking the "humanity's future is a ghost" metaphor would have proceeded in a similar way.[9]

Discussion

What does this recipe offer that we don't already have as systemic designers? I am not claiming any special advance in knowledge, but rather that the syllogism in grass, and this kind of recipe derived from it, could be a useful way to reframe our thinking abductively if we embrace exploring metaphors creatively as part of our process. The syllogism in grass gives us a way to do that, which is provocative but also potentially profound. Of course, a recipe like this could be useful at some stages of a systemic design process and potentially harmful in others; metaphors can damage or muddy our understandings of complexity just as they can illuminate them.

Bateson (1980/1991, p. 241) suggests that "metaphor was not just pretty poetry, it was not either good or bad logic" but was rather the "organizing glue of this world of mental

[9] I'm minded to address this in a more comprehensive way in a future paper, also looking at how concepts from haunting and hauntology (Byrne et al. 2022; Lockton, 2021b) which link pasts and (imagined) futures (Fisher, 2014), and juxtapose memory and place, as in many of W.G. Sebald's works (Wylie, 2007), can be relevant within systemic design.

Source: Lockton, D. (2022). Exploring bateson's syllogism in grass in systemic design. *Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design*, *RSD11*. Article 118. https://rsdsymposium.org/exploring-batesons-syllogism-in-grass-in-systemic-design/

Discussion

The Gesundheit! Institute: A 45 Year-Old Communal Hospital Experiment

Sep 1, 2016 | All Blog Posts, Communities Articles, Issue 172

By Patch Adams



Source: https://www.gen-us.net/the-gesundheit-institute-a-45-year-old-communal-hospital-experiment/