CHAPTER 12
THE INTERACTIONAL VIEW

Outline

I. The family as a system.
   A. Paul Watzlawick believes that individuals must be understood within the context of
      the family system.
   B. He was a member of the Palo Alto Group, which draws inspiration from Gregory
      Bateson.
      1. They reject the idea that individual motives and personality traits determine the
         nature of communication within a family.
      2. They are less concerned about why a person acts in a certain way than how that
         behavior affects the group.
   C. Relationships are complex functions resembling equations linking multiple variables.
   D. Along with his colleagues Janet Beavin and Don Jackson, Watzlawick presents key
      axioms describing the tentative calculus of human communication.
      1. The axioms comprise the rules of the game.
      2. Games are sequences of behavior governed by rules.
      3. Each family plays a one-of-a-kind game with homemade rules and creates its
         own reality.

II. Axioms of interpersonal communication.
   A. Family homeostasis is the tacit collusion of family members to maintain the status
      quo.
   B. The only way to recognize this destructive resistance to change is to understand the
      axioms.
   C. One cannot not communicate.
      1. Communication is inevitable.
      2. Corollary: one cannot not influence.
   D. Communication = content + relationship.
      1. Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the
         latter classifies the former.
      2. Content is what is said.
      3. Relationship is how it is said.
      4. Metacommunication is communication about communication.
      5. Relationship messages are always the most important element in any
         communication, but when a family is in trouble, metacommunication dominates.
      6. Sick family relationships only get better when members are willing to engage in
         metacommunication.
   E. The nature of a relationship depends on how both parties punctuate the
      communication sequence.
      1. Punctuation concerns how a person marks the beginning of an interpersonal
         interaction.
2. Punctuation becomes a problem when each person sees himself or herself as only reacting to, rather than provoking, a cyclical conflict.

F. All communication is either symmetrical or complementary.
   1. The interactional view emphasizes issues of control, status, and power.
   2. Symmetrical interchange is based on equal power, whereas complementary communication is based on differences of power.
   3. Healthy relationships include both kinds of communication.
   4. Relationships can only be assessed through an exchange of at least two messages.
   5. Edna Rogers and Richard Farace’s coding system categorizes control in ongoing marital interaction.
      a. One-up communication seeks to control the exchange.
      b. One-down communication yields control.
      c. One-across communication neutralizes control.
      d. Bids for dominance do not necessarily result in control of the interaction.

III. Trapped in a system with no place to go.
   A. Family systems are highly resistant to change.
   B. Double binds are contradictory demands on members of the system.
   C. The paradox of the double bind is that the high-status party in a complementary relationship insists that the low-status person act as if the relationship were symmetrical.

IV. Reframing: changing the game by changing the rules.
   A. Destructive rules can be changed only when members analyze them from outside the system.
   B. Reframing is the process of altering punctuation and looking at things in a new light.
   C. Accepting a new frame means rejecting the old one.
   D. Adapting a new interpretive frame usually requires outside help.

V. Critique: adjustments needed within the system.
   A. Recently, Janet Beavin Bavelas recommended modifying some axioms of the theory.
      1. Not all nonverbal behavior is communication. In the absence of a sender-receiver relationship and the intentional use of a shared code, nonverbal behavior is informative rather than communicative.
      2. A “whole message model” integrates verbal and nonverbal communication.
      3. The term metacommunication should be reserved for explicit communication about the process of communicating, not all communication about a relationship.
   B. Systems theories involving people are difficult to evaluate because of equifinality—a given behavioral outcome could be caused by various interconnected factors.
   C. Despite these problems, the interactional view has had a terrific impact on the field of interpersonal communication.
Key Names and Terms

Gregory Bateson
A prominent anthropologist who inspired the Palo Alto Group.

Palo Alto Group
A group of theorists committed to the study of interpersonal interaction as part of an entire system.

Paul Watzlawick
A prominent member of the Palo Alto Group, coauthor of Pragmatics of Human Communication, and champion of the interactional view of family communication.

Janet Beavin Bavelas
A researcher at the University of Victoria who coauthored Pragmatics of Human Communication and published important modifications of the interactional view in 1992.

Don Jackson
A coauthor of Pragmatics of Human Communication.

Pragmatics of Human Communication
Coauthored by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson in 1967, this book marked the beginning of widespread study of the way communicative patterns sustain or destroy relationships.

Game
A sequence of behavior governed by rules.

Family Homeostasis
The tacit collusion of family members to maintain the status quo.

Symptom Strategy
A ploy by which one seeks to avoid communication by attributing his or her inability to talk to outside forces.

Metacommunication
Communication about communication, sometimes referred to as communication about relationships.

Punctuation
The way in which a person marks the beginning of an interpersonal interaction.

Symmetrical Communication
Interchange based on equal power.

Complementary Communication
Interchange based on accepted differences in power.

One-Up Communication
Interchange that seeks to control the exchange.

One-Down Communication
Interchange that yields control of the exchange.

One-Across Communication
Interchange that neutralizes control of the exchange.

Transitory Communication
An interaction that includes one one-across message and one one-up or one-down message.
Edna Rogers and Richard Farace

While at Michigan State University, these communication researchers developed a coding system for categorizing control in ongoing marital interaction.

Double Bind

A set of mutually exclusive expectations between parties that places the low-status person in a no-win situation.

Reframing

The process of stepping outside the current perspective and giving new meaning to the same situation.

Equifinality

A systems-theory assumption that a given outcome could have been effectively caused by any or many interconnected factors.

Principal Changes

Previously Chapter 12, Griffin’s treatment remains essentially the same. The chapter has been edited for clarity and precision.

Suggestions for Discussion

Applying the theory to one’s own family

College students, who are in the midst of the process of breaking many of the formal bonds that link them to their families, are keenly aware of problems with communication that distinguish these complex systems, and thus this chapter may have special resonance for them. To give students license to speak about their own situations, remind them that the phrase “dysfunctional family” is redundant. It’s also important for students to understand at the outset that although the family is the explicit subject of this chapter, much of the theoretical material presented in the interactional view applies well to romantic relationships, friendships, and interpersonal interactions on the job.

Effects, not causes

One point of contention for many students is the focus on the effects of the family system on communication, but with no accompanying examination of the causes of the family’s unhealthy condition. Watzlawick and his co-authors were committed to this approach, and indeed it is reflected in the title of their book, The Pragmatics of Human Communication. In the introduction, the focus of the book is described as, “the pragmatic (behavioral) effects of human communication, with special attention to behavioral disorders” (p. 13). How might this alter one’s perspective—if the underlying problem is not the subject matter, but the outward signs? To drive this point home, you might consider reading directly from The Pragmatics of Human Communication:

The impossibility of seeing the mind “at work” has in recent years led to the adoption of the Black Box concept from the field of telecommunication. Applied originally to certain types of captured enemy electronic equipment that could not be opened for study because of the possibility of destruction charges inside, the concept is more generally applied to the fact that electronic hardware is by now so complex that it is sometimes
more expedient to disregard the internal structure of the device and concentrate on the
study of its specific input-output relations. While it is true that these relations may
permit inferences into what “really” goes on inside the box, this knowledge is not
essential for the study of the function of the device in the greater system of which it is a
part. (pp. 43-44, italics original)

If seen in this light, the possible or hypothetical causes of behavior assume a secondary
importance, but the effect of the behavior emerges as a criterion of prime significance
in the interaction of closely related individuals... In general, we feel that a symptom is a
piece of behavior that has profound effects on influencing the surroundings of the
patient. A rule of thumb can be stated in this connection: where the why? of a piece of
behavior remains obscure, the question what for? can still supply a valid answer. (p. 45,
italics original)

These two passages often lead to very interesting discussion matter for students, who
tend to be immersed in a system where the cause trumps the effect in terms of importance.
But in the case of families, taking the system apart is often an impossibility and discovery of
root causes an improbability. By assuming Watzlawick, et al.’s Black Box approach, valuable
information can be obtained without dismantling the system.

Metacommunication
In this discussion of the axiom that “communication = content + relationship,” Griffin
notes Watzlawick’s assertion that when a family is in trouble, metacommunication dominates
the discussion. We would be curious to know if your students confirm this claim, particularly
since the ability to discuss patterns of communication is essential to curing an unhealthy
family system. Has metacommunication solved problems in their families? It’s also interesting
to note that the concept of metacommunication is very similar to Deborah Tannen’s notion of
the “metamessage,” which accounts for the relational context of the words spoken in
discussion. For Tannen, of course, men and women respond differently to metamessages, an
issue not explicitly raised in the interactional view. If you’d like to begin anticipating Tannen’s
work (featured in Chapter 33), then you may wish to raise issues of gender tentatively here.

One-across messages
Due to space considerations, Griffin has not provided very much explanation of the one-
across message, which—according to Rogers and Farace—is a neutralizing or control-leveling
utterance that carries the interaction along with a minimized effort at controlling the
relationship (181). They view the one-across message as an assertion of extension that
continues the flow or theme of the proceeding message. In addition, a noncommittal response
to a question (for example, “I don’t know”) would also be classified as a one-across response.
You may wish to discuss these messages more fully in class.

Reframing
Reframing is a difficult concept for many students to understand. To help them, we
liken this “aha” experience to a well-known historical shift in paradigm. Our view of the solar
system is much enhanced when we realize that the sun, rather than the earth, is its center. We
also refer to reframing as “getting out of the fishbowl,” since the whole point is to remove
yourself from the system long enough to view it objectively. Reframing is most likely closely
linked with perspective taking, a fundamental communication skill that may be introduced in other communication courses in your program such as interpersonal communication. In addition, perspective taking is central to the next chapter on constructivism. It is important to note that reframing may take place with distance in time and space. For example, students may experience reframing when they go away to college. Having thought through the complex family dynamics that are now removed from their daily lives, they may find that—for better and for worse—they “can’t go home again.” They may find this process a fruitful topic for discussion. Em Griffin elucidates the concept of reframing with the example of the perennially controversial Senator (former First Lady) Hillary Rodham Clinton. He asks his students to discuss how changes in punctuation can allow her to be reframed positively or negatively. The same can be done with her husband’s successor, President George W. Bush.

**Sample Application Log**

Matthew

My family could be a perfect model for this theory. As of a year ago, my father has developed a mental disorder that has truly affected every member of our family, not just him. He is the one with the “problem,” however, the rest of the family perpetuated this problem until we learned to reframe the situation. My mother was truly the “enabler” of the family, always providing the back door out for my dad. My brothers and I often had fiery tempers whenever certain subjects pertaining to his disorder would arise. Our resistance to even broach the topic kept everything nicely swept under the rug. It wasn’t until half of my family sought counseling that we had the nerve to approach my dad and exercise “tough love” by no longer allowing his disorder to rule our lives. As the book said, “I can change myself. Others I can only love.” My response to my father changed when I realized that I could not make him well, I could only place my love for him in a different picture frame. It may not be a pretty picture frame, but it’s functional, and contains my love for him in a way that no other picture frame does.

**Exercises and Activities**

**Dear Abby: In need of advice**

Under Questions to Sharpen Your Focus in the textbook, #4 can be extremely effective, particularly since the letters featured in these columns are written by interested parties within family systems and thus usually reveal the subjective perspective of an ardent punctuator. It can also be instructive to discuss with students the fact that, in many cases, the responses from the columnists fail to take the intricate family systems into account. So often, the advice offered by the “expert” simply perpetuates the letter writer’s punctuation without helping him or her to reframe, to see the system from the outside. If you or your students are more in tune with the electronic media, then examples from radio therapists or television talk shows may serve you well. The popular radio therapist “Dr. Laura,” for example, produces simplistic, glib advice that usually misses the significance of families as systems. You may also wish to discuss how the view of families (and other groups) as systems contrasts with the more individually oriented assumptions of uncertainty reduction theory and social penetration theory (see also Integrative Essay Question #29 below).
Reframing: A narrative exercise

College teachers and academic advisors often hear versions of the following story from students, particularly those in their first year away from home. It is, we believe, a good illustration of key tenets of the interactional view to which students can readily relate:

I enjoyed seeing my old high school friends over the winter break, but my parents really got on my nerves. They nagged me to come in early in the evenings, and they saw to it that sleeping-in was impossible. I had to eat on their schedule. My mother’s having a real problem letting go of mothering me—she still treats me like I’m ten. When I protest she says, “You have to understand that you’ll always be my precious little child.” For some reason, that bothers me, and I stomp around and say something like “I’m an adult, so treat me like one!” or “As my mother, you ought to understand that I need my autonomy!” Then she gets huffy and claims that my manner and tone of voice are unpleasant. Or she’ll say, “I don’t like your body language.” I wish she’d focus on what I’m saying instead of getting off on tangents. One time she said to me, “You just hurt my feelings,” but I hadn’t even said anything! My father’s obsessed with my smoking. He claims that the secondhand smoke bothers him, but it really bothers me that he never complains when his buddies smoke in his presence. He’s also been riding me because I changed my major from premed to communication. He says, “I wish you’d go back to being premed—not for me, but for your own future.” From my first day at home, I tried to be assertive about my needs and values and have done my best not to back down, but they just don’t seem to appreciate my efforts to be my own person. There’s not much giving in around the house. I wish they would let go. And my little sister is acting strange. My parents claim that she was an angel all fall, but when I arrived home I quickly saw that this couldn’t have been the case. The whole time I was there, she was getting into trouble right and left, continually requiring my parents to drop whatever they were doing—especially when it was something with me—to deal with her crises. Just when Dad and I were about to leave to attend a concert I’d been looking forward to for days, she announces that she thinks she’s pregnant. Of course that brings down the house, and the concert is forgotten. And of course she isn’t pregnant. Later, when I called her on it, she told me that I was the one who was out of line. She complains about my yelling, and the way I talk to her. Can you believe that? I told her, “You ought to take my advice because I’m older than you!” She shoots back, “You ought to leave me alone because you don’t really live here anymore!” Honestly, I love my family, but they’re nuts, and they drive me crazy. I’m sure glad to be back at school. Now if I could just get my roommate to listen to reason . . . .

After your students have read or heard this narrative (or one like it that you have supplied or one they create about their own college experience), discuss the key theoretical issues it raises. How can they help the storyteller to understand the dynamics of his or her family from a vantage point outside the system? How can this new perspective lead to reframing? The point, of course, is not to vilify the student or particular members of the family, but to understand the complex system in which they interact. Depending on your interests and the viewing habits of students, examples of families in soap operas, dramas, and situation comedies can also serve to enliven the interactional view.
Punctuation

Under Questions to Sharpen Your Focus in the textbook, #2 is thought-provoking, although in these times many of our students view the cold war as ancient history. If you or your students enjoy talking about politics, an interactional perspective on nuclear stockpiling may be augmented by a more specific discussion of U.S.-Soviet relations in the 1960s. The dramatic reactions and counterreactions that characterized the controversial rise of Castro, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the construction of the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban missile crisis can help students to see how adversaries punctuate in order to define provocation and reaction to their own advantage. More recently, political statements involving the Persian Gulf War, the Israeli-Arab conflict (which Em Griffin particularly likes to use), the Irish conflict, the Bosnian civil war, the crisis in Kosovo, and the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq have all exhibited the tragic consequences of punctuation. Peace negotiators, the family therapists of global politics, have worked with varying success to help world leaders step outside the systems of national and ethnic conflict to reframe. You might ask your students how al Qaeda terrorists might punctuate September 11.

The double bind

If students have difficulty coming up with responses to #3 under the textbook’s Questions to Sharpen Your Focus, remind them of this notorious professorial request: “Tell me what you really think of this exam/course/assignment?” That should get them going!

Media portrayals

Interesting films featuring complex, dynamic family systems include When a Man Loves a Woman, Eat Drink Man Woman, and A River Runs through It. When a Man Loves a Woman features a family wracked by alcoholism. As the wife/mother, played by Meg Ryan, slips deeper and deeper into drinking, other members of the family system alter their behavior to adjust to her condition. A particularly good moment illustrating the dynamic nature of the system is the two-minute breakfast scene that takes place 28 1/2 minutes into the film. It’s also important to note that even after the wife/mother has ceased to drink, other members of the family continue to exhibit the patterns of behavior that began when she was heavily dependent on alcohol. To improve the family system, everyone must reframe. Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? showcases a dysfunctional couple who stage—among other things—a clinic on one-up communication. In fact, the play is the central feature in the fifth chapter of The Pragmatics of Human Communication. For historians, A Lion in Winter features the tortured communication of one of medieval England’s most famous—and most dysfunctional—families.

Family dysfunction

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he commissions a volunteer troupe of student actors to stage a brief improvised play featuring a family in which the system is out of balance. Such dramas—when carefully debriefed in class—bring light and levity to Watzlawick’s systematic machinery. Griffin also uses these lyrics (sung to the tune of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”) to illustrate the interrelatedness of family dysfunction:

I am the Great Enabler
There is nothing I wouldn’t do
To make sure my kids are happy,
Even though they’re chugging brew.
Tough love is so disturbing;  
On setting limits I’m not keen.  
What if my friends and family  
Look at me and think I’m mean?

Life is best when I detach—  
Let my children feel  
The consequences of their acts—  
Choices in world that’s real.

But I’m the Great Enabler,  
Crazy, but I just don’t see,  
Faced with my codependence,  
My kid could soon be history.

Further Resources

- We highly recommend Janet Yerby, Nancy Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Arthur P. Bochner’s excellent textbook, *Understanding Family Communication*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1995), which is largely based on the interactional approach championed by Watzlawick and his associates. The book is filled with useful examples and case studies, and it provides in-depth discussion, elaboration, and extension of the basic principles set forth by Griffin in this chapter. It is also a good source for further discussion and examples of social constructionism and relational dialectics.


Literary sources

- If you enjoy using literature to illustrate theory, I heartily recommend Eudora Welty’s humorous short story, “Why I Live at the P.O.,” which can be found in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, 46-56, and numerous literary anthologies. The storyteller’s intriguingly punctuated version of her family’s behavior constitutes a wonderful example of dysfunctional communication.

Feature films

- There is an abundance of feature-length films that highlight families and can be used as fitting examples of the interactional view. Some favorites include *Pieces of April, My Big Fat Greek Wedding, What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?*, and *Mi Familia (My Family)*.
Sample Examination Questions

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