

CHAPTER

4

PATTERNS OF  
INTERACTIONAL PARADOXES

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*In formal logic a contradiction is the sign of defeat: but in the evolution of real knowledge it marks the first step in progress towards victory.*

—Alfred North Whitehead, 1948

Although the best of all possible worlds may be free from contradiction and paradox, the highly probabilistic world of human behavior offers little such luxury. Long gone are the days when simple linear cause-effect determinism offered the hope of guiding construction of an adequate view of human communication, behavior, and change. New metaphors are needed, new methods, new ways of seeing.

One alternative construct that has received increasing attention in recent years is that of "paradox," an idea that has charmed and challenged generations of philosophers. Whereas current interest in paradox as a term of description for human interaction can be traced largely to the work of Bateson and his 1950s research team which formulated the double-bind theory of schizophrenia (Bateson, 1955; Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956), the concept has much richer roots and broader implications.

This chapter casts the net widely in exploring the idea of paradox in philosophy, logic, psychotherapy, and rhetoric with the end of laying some groundwork for the use of paradox as a form of description to illuminate a variety of communicational and interactional patterns. Far from positioning paradox on the "dark side" of interpersonal communication, we argue instead that paradoxical communication in the broadest sense is central to

human communication and is most appropriately viewed as normative rather than deviant behavior.

### PARADOX: CHARMS AND CHALLENGES

Oscar Wilde captured the charm of the paradox when he reputedly quipped that "a paradox is a truth standing on its head to attract attention." It is probably unnecessary to expound here on the charm of the paradox (see Falletta, 1983, Hofstadter, 1979; Hughes & Brecht, 1975). Moreover, it is likely impossible, with any didactic attempt destined for the same tedium as explaining a joke. Rather, the challenge of paradox for communication theory, research, and teaching is more to the point, for attention to interactional paradoxes challenges at least four assumptions of conventional wisdom.

First is the assumption that ideas are to be judged by a binary truth criterion: Ideas are either true or false (given some probability factor), and certainly not true *and* false. But here we run into the first problem with paradox, for as Bateson (cited in Brand, 1974, p. 31) remarked, "a paradox is an argument in which you take sides—both sides," and as Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967, p. 188) more formally suggested, "Paradox may be defined as a contradiction that follows correct deduction from consistent premises." The fact remains, as Alan Watts (1957) pointed out, that Western thinking is predominantly true/false and either/or rather than both/and. Binary thinking sets the stage for paradox by denying the validity of contradiction as a legitimate form of thought. From this perspective, paradoxical statements always represent something to be overcome, rather than standing for a peculiar form of truth in their own right. The "both/and" sort of logic said to characterize Eastern thought helps to explain why paradox as we conceive it is not problematic in Eastern philosophy, although the Western mind "finds," for instance, the discipline of Zen rife with paradox, especially in the teaching device of the Koans. Actually, there is no concept in Chinese or Japanese that even approximates the Western notion of paradox, although the Chinese character meaning *mujun* (*mu* = the spear that can pierce anything; *jun* = the shield that can deflect anything) conveys a similar notion of confusion.

A second challenge paradox presents is to the deep-rooted assumption that "man is a rational being." The "good man speaking well" in rhetorical theory has always been a creature of eminent *logos*, given to appeals of unreason (the classical *pathos*) only with some reluctance. This is not to suggest that reason is an inappropriate model of behavior, but rather to suggest in good company that at least syllogistic reason may be a grossly inadequate model of interpersonal logic. Paradox appeals to other than the common opinion, while paradoxically and often unnervingly making a sort of "uncommon

sense." As Slaatte (1968, p. 6) argued, the "paradox of the paradox per se" refers to "two opposite properties of the paradox itself: its sheer impertinence to reason, on the one hand, and its profounder pertinence to reason, on the other." Paradox by definition counters prevailing opinion, thus if judged by extant standards of reason it inevitably is "non-sense." But here it can be shown that the "rational human" criterion misses the point: Paradox at its best is creative unreason, giving a profound glimpse of uncommon sense.

A third convention challenged by paradox is the stubborn persistence in much psychotherapy and interpersonal communication training of what Pearce (1977) termed the "Humanistic Celebration" approach. The assumptions of this model privilege behaviors related to self-disclosure, feedback, openness, trust, and self-actualization. It has taken some years for the full limits of these utopian assumptions to be recognized for the problem-engendering premises they contain (see Bochner, 1982; Parks, 1982). As Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974, p. 61) pointed out, "it is the premise that things *should be* a certain way which is the problem and which requires change, and not the way things *are*. Without the utopian premise, the actuality of the situation might be quite bearable." How does paradox counter this trend? By striking at the heart of the matter and suggesting that perhaps human behavior is characteristically and endemically contradictory, perplexing, and even perverse. Life is complicated, and so are human relationships, and no simplistic utopian reductionism can even suggest the right questions, let alone provide eternal bliss through a few basic rules. To view paradox as normative in human communication can greatly increase one's understanding and tolerance for ambiguity, a hallmark of intelligence and maturity. Finally, paradox presents a strong challenge to the limits of prevailing research methods. Interactional paradoxes are multileveled, diachronic, context dependent, and transactional in nature. It is very difficult to capture any one of these qualities in a rigorous and systematic fashion, let alone all of them. In particular, the double-bind construct violates the assumption of traditional experimental design that all independent variables operate at equivalent levels of abstraction (Abeles, 1976).

Now that the challenges posed by the study of interactional paradoxes have been sketched, we can review how paradox has been conceptualized as a general idea and within the domains of philosophy, logic, psychotherapy, and rhetoric before suggesting what might be construed as critical dimensions of interactional paradoxes.

### PARADOX IN GENERAL

From its earliest use in Western thought, the idea of paradox has had two meanings: first, a broad general sense, and second, the special sense posed by the logical paradoxes of Zeno of Elea. Both are legitimate, albeit within

different domains, and confusion between paradox in a general sense and paradox as a technical term in logic remains today.

*Paradoxos* in the Greek combines two roots: *para*, which can mean variously beside, by, with, beyond, past, against, or contrary to; and *doxos*, which means "that which is generally thought or believed," the "common opinion" as contrasted to *episteme*, which is the ("higher") knowledge of scientific understanding. Thus, paradox is that which is "contrary to expectation" or "incredible" (as opposed to the orthodox "correct" opinion) (Liddell & Scott, 1968, p. 1309). Paradox is an anomaly that does not "fit" into one's system of premises and probabilities. Paradox "breaks frame," which may account for why it was also used in Attic Greek as a term for distinguished athletes, musicians, and artists. Paradox in this sense is the agent of learning, creativity, and change.

Two important elements at work here are *contrariety* and *surprise*. Paradox makes the sort of sense that is immediately apprehended but seldom anticipated and difficult to explain. Once the matter is resolved by a shift in one's premises such that the paradox becomes incorporated into the system of probabilities, it vanishes! This is the slippery part of the idea; the "now you see it now you don't" character of paradox. A joke is seldom funny upon second hearing; and there is nothing "incredible" about the second artist to make a giant soup can or the second runner of the 4-minute mile.

Paradox is time and context dependent. The doctrine that the earth revolves around the sun was once called the "Copernican paradox," anomalous as the belief was to the prevailing Ptolemaic cosmology. If one chooses to engage a paradox rather than ignore it, a certain law of diminishing novelty operates until the once incredible apprehension becomes yet another invisible premise of one's belief system. Thus, Quine (1976, pp. 9, 12) was led to remark that one man's paradox becomes another man's platitude, give or take a couple of thousand years.

## PARADOX IN PHILOSOPHY

If one takes the study of paradox to be roughly synonymous with the study of contradiction and opposition, then much of Western philosophy is to the point. Slaatte (1968, p. 4) offered a capable synthesis of the pertinence of paradox to philosophy, suggesting that problems of unity and plurality, subject vs. object, freedom vs. necessity, permanence and change, form and matter, identity amidst diversity, Being vs. Nonbeing, and the coincidence of opposites pondered by the likes of Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle onward through Kant, Hegel, and Sartre are best captured through a dialectical model of paradox. From this view, "paradox is an idea involving two opposing thoughts or propositions which however contradictory, are equally necessary to convey

a more imposing, illuminating, life-related or provocative insight into truth than either factor can muster in its own right." Here, then:

paradox is a dialectical model of communication intrinsic to the existential perspective in contrast to the neutral, speculative, and objective approaches. Truth is seen in vital relation to the self in his existence-as-he-experiences-it; it is not related as though one object is thrust upon another. If truth is to be known, it must be something in which we are perennially involved as knowing subjects and from which, as persons, we are never exempt. (Slaatte, 1968, p. 33)

Slaatte views paradox as central to issues of existence, rather than taking the more typical philosophical stance that treats paradox as something to be neutralized.

Because paradox generally involves a sort of contradiction, perhaps most ideas could be generated as "paradoxical" by juxtaposing them to that which they are not. Master symbolist Burke (1969, p. 35) takes this approach in describing the "paradox of the absolute" (God as an "absolute" person would be *impersonal*—the negation of personality) and the "paradox of substance":

The word "substance," used to designate what a thing *is*, derives from a word designating something a thing *is not*. That is, though used to designate something *within* the thing, *intrinsic* to it, the word etymologically refers to something *outside* the thing, *extrinsic* to it. Or otherwise put: the word in its etymological origins would refer to an attribute of the thing's *context*, since that which supports or underlies a thing would be part of a thing's context. And a thing's context, being outside or beyond the thing, would be something that the thing *is not*. (p. 23)

Such "antimonies of definition" depend both on semantic manipulation and the either/or choice of a two-valued logic and are characteristic of philosophical treatments of paradox. More to the point is the special way in which paradox has been construed in formal logic, for we are then a step closer to the domain of interactional paradoxes.

### PARADOX IN LOGIC

The various sorts of paradox common to studies in logic and mathematics always arise from a problem posed and found to be unsolvable within the frame of given axiomatic systems. Thus, logical paradoxes, like paradox in general, are fundamentally contrary to opinion—hence, incredible. The most common logical paradoxes are paradoxes of the infinite and paradoxes of self-reference.

Paradoxes of the infinite were first posed by Zeno of Elea (circa 390 B.C.) and reported in Aristotle's *Physics*. Zeno "proved," for instance, that motion is impossible by arguing that when a race is run, the runner must first run one-half the distance, and before that one-half of that, and before that one-half of that, and because the sequence of runs he or she must complete has the form of a regression ( $1/16, 1/8, 1/4, 1/2$ ), it has no first number, and thus the runner cannot even start. Common empirics say, of course, that such a conclusion is nonsense, but it was not until the invention of the theory of convergent series, according to which an infinite series can have a finite limit, that the logical problem posed was ameliorated by expanding the theoretical frame to account for Zeno's anomaly. The apparent triviality of Zeno's problems notwithstanding, they have engaged some of philosophy's finest minds (e.g., Grunbaum, 1967; Hofstadter, 1979; Salmon, 1970). As Salmon (1970, p. 43) put it, "Zeno's paradoxes have an onion-like quality: as one peels away outer layers disposing of the more superficial difficulties, new and more profound problems are revealed." However, the nature of Zeno's problems, which are all complex variations of the "contrary to common opinion" genre of paradox, are distinct from the more formally described paradoxes of self-reference.

Paradoxes of self-reference are typically assigned three necessary terms of description: self-reference, contradiction, and vicious circularity (Hughes & Brecht, 1975, p. 2).

Self-reference is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the generation of paradox. For instance, the sentence "I am apologizing" is self-referential, but trivial. "This sentence has thirty-one letters" is also self-referential (and true of itself), but not at all paradoxical. Branham and Pearce (1985, p. 23) called this form a "charmed loop."

Now, when contradiction is combined with self-reference, something puzzling begins to appear. "I'm sorry that I am apologizing" is self-referential and untrue, hence contradictory, as is "I never speak for myself," and "This sentence has thirty letters." Contradictory self-referential statements which begin to appear nontrivial and hence problematic, such as "Ignore this statement," or "All rules have exceptions," are called "subversive loops" by Branham and Pearce (1985, p. 24) and "circular contradictions"—"almost paradoxes" by Hughes and Brecht (1975, p. 2) because they lack vicious circularity. These contradictions, Hughes and Brecht (1975, p. 2) suggested, "do go round in a circle, but they do not go round and round. One might say that they are paradoxical, but that they are not paradoxes."

When the condition of vicious circularity is added to self-reference and contradiction, a full logical paradox can emerge, as in the classic "I am lying" paradox: If I am lying, I am telling the truth, and if I am telling the truth, I am lying (see also examples by Hofstadter, 1979, Quine, 1976). (Note how this depends upon a true/false logic.) Russell's classic question—"Is the set

of all sets which are not members of themselves a member of itself?"—better meets the conditions of self-reference, contradiction, and vicious circularity. If they are not members, they are members, and if they are members, they are not members, *ad infinitum* in perpetual oscillation.

How does one untangle such knots? Ignoring the problem or not viewing such contradiction as problematic in the first place are two roads less traveled. More typically, some sort of bracketing and/or reframing is introduced in order to neutralize paradox (e.g., Brown, 1972; Korzybski, 1948; Quine, 1976; Whitehead & Russell, 1910).

In common to most of these attempts to "solve" the problem of paradox is a realignment of one's world view (semantic theory, etc.) in order to construct a frame large enough to accommodate the "problem" of paradox. Only Brown (1972, p. xi) renders paradox "unproblematic," claiming that "the implications of this in the fields of logic, philosophy, mathematics, and even physics, are profound."

The problem with the "problem" of paradox is that by definition what is paradoxical is what is "contrary to opinion," thus there is no end to the progression of new paradoxes that challenge older solutions to former paradoxes. Paradox is always that which one cannot conventionally account for; whatever can be accounted for by the Theory of Types, or multiordinality of terms, or convergent series, or imaginary numbers, is no longer, by definition, paradoxical. Thus, "paradox," suggested G. K. Chesterton's interpreter, "might be called the science of gaps" (Kenner, 1947, p. 17). And once the gap is accounted for in some fashion, we are led back to Quine's suggestion that one person's paradox is another person's platitude, given time. It is for this reason that any attempt to establish a final and formal definition, taxonomy, typology, or whatever of paradox is bound to crumble after a short while as new anomalies arise to challenge—in the spirit of paradox—any taxonomy of paradox itself.

### FROM PARADOX TO DOUBLE BIND

Bateson and his colleagues first fully explored the potential of paradox as what he called an "epistemological matrix" for the description of behavioral sequences (cited in Wilder, 1979, p. 178), although the term had been previously used by Frankl (1960) in a more limited sense, and the "spirit" of paradox is evident in earlier writers (e.g., Dunlap, 1928; Rosen, 1953). Bateson (1972, p. 202) gave Haley credit "for recognizing that the symptoms of schizophrenia are suggestive of an inability to discriminate the Logical Types," an observation which led directly to Bateson's formulation of the "double-bind" hypothesis. Specifically, Bateson (1972, p. 208) offered the general characteristics of a double-bind situation:

1. When the individual is involved in an intense relationship, that is, a relationship in which one feels it is vitally important that he or she discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he or she may respond appropriately.
2. When the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one of these denies the other.
3. When the individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his or her discrimination of what order of message to respond to, that is, one cannot make a metacommunicative statement.

The inability to metacommunicate about the conflicting levels of messages is what distinguishes double binds from mixed messages. One is in a bind only if one cannot escape. A binding interaction may result from repeated patterns from infancy, attempts by one interactant to control the other, fear of losing the relationship, and so on, which also warn in some way, "Do not talk about this." Bateson (1972, p. 217) provided the classic example to illustrate the double bind:

A young man who had fairly well recovered from an acute schizophrenic episode was visited in the hospital by his mother. He was glad to see her and impulsively put his arm around her shoulder, 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.

Bateson argued that if the man had been able to comment on his mother's difficulty with receiving affection, he might not have behaved violently after the episode. Instead, "the schizophrenic patient doesn't have this possibility open to him. His intense dependency and training prevents him from commenting upon his mother's communicative behavior, though she comments on his and forces him to accept and to attempt to deal with the complicated sequence" (Bateson, 1972, p. 217).

Or, consider the paradoxical injunction when a mother says to her son, "You are free to go son. Don't worry if I start crying." The two contradictory messages are operating on two levels which essentially control the son no matter if he stays or goes; he is in a "no win" situation because he cannot comment on the conflicting messages, and he will experience guilt if he goes and anger at his submission if he stays (Riordan, Severinsen, Martin, & Martin, 1986). If conditions for a double bind persist, an individual can begin to perceive his or her world in double-bind patterns, responding to any part of the pattern with behavior that is characteristic of schizophrenia. In this sense, paradoxical communication is pathological.



The double-bind hypothesis has provoked an enormous body of clinical and research literature (see, for instance, Berger, 1978; Sluzki & Ransom, 1976). Further, the double-bind hypothesis has been examined within a rich variety of contexts across many disciplines. Its principles have been critically applied in essays such as Watzlawick et al.'s (1967) analysis of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Benson's study of double binds in Wiseman's film *High School* (in Benson & Anderson, 1989), Chesebro's (1980) study of paradoxical views of homosexuality in social science literature, Mechling's (1988) examination of Heller's *Catch-22*, Wilkins's (1989) interpretation of the Fool as an "unsuccessful medieval psychotherapist" in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Wilder's (1989, 1991) studies of the rhetoric of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and portrayals of Vietnam veterans in film. The double-bind concept has been used to analyze mass conversions into a religious group (Edwards, 1981), the withdrawal and denial of responsibility in an organizational setting (Soldow, 1981), and the context for women caught between conflicting demands of their roles at work, at home, and within their culture (Camden & Witt, 1983; Gonzalez, 1988; Heriot, 1983; Moore & Twombly, 1990; Reohr, 1981).

From this range of studies it is evident that although paradox and double-bind are stubbornly resistant to experimental codification, they offer a metaphoric gold mine for critical and analytic thinking.

### PARADOX IN THERAPY

The preponderance of double-bind studies come from research and practice in psychotherapy. In addition to positing schizophrenic behavior as a reaction to communicative context, Bateson and his team suggested that paradoxical forms can be activated within a different environment—that of therapy—to conversely "drive people sane" by posing a sort of paradoxical "double-blessing"—"blessed-if-you-do-blessed-if-you-don't"—in which the patient improves no matter which choice is pursued within a frame constructed by the therapist.

After Haley's (1963) seminal work, numerous researchers and clinicians incorporated paradoxical strategies into therapeutic practice. Most notable, the therapeutic domain has been explored by Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cechchin, and Prata (1978), Watzlawick et al. (1967), Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974), and Weeks and L'Abate (1979, 1982). All of these researchers are less concerned with technical issues of paradox than with the practical task of discovering and explaining what works to change people. And, it appears, paradox is a suitable metaphor for describing the structure of a range of potent strategies.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, paradoxical strategies spread like wildfire through the family therapy literature, accompanied by much discussion

and debate regarding how, where, when, and by whom such interventions should be considered. Of the many approaches to paradoxical intervention compared in several reviews (Bogdan, 1982; Massey, 1986; Mozdierz, Lisiecki, & Macchitelli, 1989; Riordan et al., 1986; Rohrbaugh et al., 1977; Soper & L'Abate, 1980; West & Zarski, 1983), the most typical types are termed prescribing the symptom, positioning, restraining, and ordeal (Hirschmann & Sprenkle, 1989). In prescribing the symptom, the patient is told to maintain or exaggerate the behavior he or she seeks to change, with the end result giving the patient a sense of control over the symptom. In positioning strategies, the therapist takes a more extreme position about the problem than the patient ("I have overestimated your abilities to change your behavior, so we need to discuss how you're going to live with your problem"), using the patient's resistance to produce change. Restraining involves a "go slow" approach in which the patient is instructed either not to change or to think about the dangers of improvement. Ordeal intervention involves instructing the patient to perform an unpleasant task whenever the symptom "spontaneously" occurs, so that the symptom is preempted by a worse alternative and thus discouraged.

These paradoxical interventions are used to rupture individual patterns of behavior or behavior of a family system. From a communication perspective, it is interesting to note how each intervention operates from paradoxical assumptions. The patient is told, respectively: in order to lose the condition, keep it; in order to get better, get worse; in order to change, remain the same; and to get rid of the symptom, exchange it for a worse symptom.

One more intervention that is frequently discussed in the literature is reframing and relabeling of behavior (Haley, 1963; Watzlawick et al., 1974). This involves substituting the view of problematic behavior as negative with a view of it as positive and functional. For example, rather than treating a teenager's propensity toward deviance as a threat to family stability, the family could reframe the behavior as an opportunity to expand its capacity for accepting and incorporating change. Teismann (1979) suggested relabeling jealousy with words that accent the positive aspects of jealousy such as romantic, passionate, loyal, and so on, and to instruct couples to engage in what he calls "serious playfulness." Haley (1963), using relabeling as a synonym for reframing, pointed out that relabeling problematic behavior in couples can make continuing the behavior more of an ordeal than changing. Selvini-Palazzoli et al.'s (1978) Milan Group has become especially identified with the reframing strategy of "positive connotation," which frames all behavior as functional. What makes these reframing moves paradox like is their counterintuitive quality—their "uncommon sense."

The problem-solving model of the Brief Therapy Center at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto engages paradox at an even more general level. During the initial interview, once the presented problem and its at-

tempted solution are identified to the satisfaction of the therapist, an intervention is designed to interdict the problem-engendering solution rather than the "problem" itself. This is done in the belief that the attempted solution itself is responsible for maintaining the problem. In this case the "solution" has become the "problem," through a bit of semantic wizardry. But this slight twist in perspective and framing, paradoxical indeed in the sense of "contrary to common opinion," produces some extraordinary interventions that "orthodox" approaches lead one to overlook (Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick, & Bodin, 1974).

The general popularity and repeated success of paradoxical interventions can be attributed to several factors (Soper & L'Abate, 1980). Most practitioners do not recommend a paradoxical maneuver until more conventional approaches have been exhausted. In this case, paradox appeals to a sense of novelty. Because the approach is unexpected, it stands a chance of being heard and thus stimulates a potential for change. Further, after securing the patient's trust and agreement to comply, the "nonsensical" aspect of paradox places the patient in a position of not possibly being able to comply with the directive to not change. All the while the therapist plays dumb in order to facilitate patient compliance. Also, as the most widely agreed on explanation, paradox works because people enter into therapy seeking help but are often resistant to treatment, as well as often intent on proving therapy as a failure. Instructing the patient to not change suggests any resistance will promote change.

Lest one begins to accept paradoxical interventions as a panacea for transforming destructive interactional behavior, it must be noted that paradoxical techniques are not without their criticisms. There is controversy over what is to be regarded as a paradoxical intervention (Dell, 1986), how or if they should be used (Mozdzierz et al., 1989; Schwartz & Perrotta, 1985; Treacher, 1988; Wilkins, 1989), and whether ethical considerations have been fully addressed (Henderson, 1987).

Now, how does "paradox" as a descriptive metaphor for therapy map onto "paradox" as an idea in philosophy and logic? It depends. If one defines paradox in the most general sense as something unexpected that is contrary to opinion (i.e., incredible), then almost any clever and surprising therapeutic intervention can truly be termed "paradoxical."

If, however, one maps therapeutic paradoxes onto the more structured logical terms of description introduced earlier—self-reference, contradiction, and vicious circularity—the domain of what one may legitimately term an interactional or therapeutic paradox becomes more restricted. And it becomes more restricted yet if we add a fourth term of description for interactional paradoxes—proscription of conventional choice. For instance, self-reference—so critical to logical paradoxes—becomes a quiet attribute in most interactional paradoxes; descriptive, but seldom critically so. On the other hand,

contradiction, vicious circularity, and proscription of choice are much easier to identify in terms of actual behavior: An assertion perpetually accompanied by its denial gets people stuck going round and round through the same routine, circle, pattern, script, and so forth.

The fundamental point in such mapping is that the domains of logic and philosophy and the domain of human behavior in relationships are different in important ways. Reading a paradox in a book and observing a paradoxical interaction in someone else's relationship and experiencing the direct effect of a paradox in one's own relationship are essentially different experiences. This is at least part of the reason why determination of the criteria for the transforms of a construct taken from the world of logic and mapped onto the far fuzzier world of human behavior present such a challenge (see, for example, Cronen, Johnson, & Lannamann, 1982).

### FROM DOUBLE BINDS TO DOUBLE BLESSINGS

So far we have discussed some behavioral effects of paradoxical communication and the double bind. As Watzlawick et al. (1967) point out, a person caught in a double bind may exhibit behavior characteristic of the schizophrenic by either desperately searching for clues to give meaning to the messages being communicated, complying with illogical injunctions literally, or withdrawing from human interaction altogether. Although such reactions may be a product of long-term double-bind patterns, short-term paradoxical messages may also produce confusion and uncertainty in daily communication (Bowers & Sanders, 1974). Some typical paradox like contexts in so-called normative communication include irony (Kaufer, 1981; Weick & Browning, 1986), strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984), disqualification or equivocal communication (Bavelas, 1983; Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990; Chovil, this volume), constructive dilemmas (Wishbow, 1987), and humor (Koestler, 1964; Paulos, 1980).

Several studies have been conducted specifically related to speech pedagogy and persuasion. Worthington, Tipton, Cromley, Richards, and Janke (1984) found that paradoxical injunctions to instruct students to practice being anxious were not significant in reducing speech anxiety. Reframing, however, appears to be a teachable self-help skill for solving interpersonal problems (Miller & Osmunson, 1989). Swann, Pelham, and Chidester (1988) used a paradoxical strategy to test persuasion in opinion change, finding that people changed their beliefs because they were resisting questions reflecting more extreme positions than their own.

There also appears to be a strong relationship between double binds and creativity. Bateson's (1969) work with porpoises led him to believe that double-

bind situations can produce entirely new behavior. Colligan (1983, p. 41) expanded on this hypothesis in arguing that "all creative acts will be the result of double bind sequences." Likewise, Peterson and Langellier (1982, p. 242) suggested that the "creative double bind" is instrumental in managing the situational constraints of "genuine pretense" in dramatic performance.

One of the most powerful and intriguing benevolent paradoxical contexts is created for the student of Zen Buddhism through practice of the Koans, paradox like statements such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or "Don't think about a monkey." Jichaku, Fujita, and Shapiro (1984) suggested that the practice of Koan Zen as a path to enlightenment is a double-bind situation of the "Be Spontaneous" type. Students must resolve the Koan to attain enlightenment—reaching an understanding of the dualistic nature of the world as form (phenomenal existence) and emptiness (essential existence)—"form as emptiness and emptiness as form" (Aitken, 1982, quoted in Jichaku et al., p. 213). In the process of becoming enlightened, the student passes through the double bind because "enlightenment cannot be attained and deepened upon demand. Enlightenment is a spontaneous experience, and the very preoccupation with eliciting enlightenment, and with deepening it, is what obstructs it" (p. 215). Paradoxically, Zen masters instruct students to give up striving for what they are striving for and to become all absorbed with only the Koan.

Bateson et al. (1956, p. 208) first suggested that while the Zen master uses paradox to bring enlightenment to his pupil, in another context it might produce schizophrenia:

One of the things he does is to hold a stick over the pupil's head and say fiercely, "If you say this stick is real, I will strike you with it. If you say this stick is not real, I will strike you with it. If you do not say anything, I will strike you with it." We feel that the schizophrenic finds himself continually in the same situation as the pupil, but he achieves something like disorientation rather than enlightenment. The Zen pupil might reach up and take the stick away from the master—who might accept this response, but the schizophrenic has no such choice since with him there is no not caring about the relationship, and his mother's aims and awareness are not like the master's.

Jichaku et al. (1984) asserted that the interpersonal context for practicing Zen is benevolent, because it involves a successful resolution to the double bind through a competent Zen instructor, the essential attitudes of Great Faith, Great Doubt, and Great Determination for students in Zen training, and a supportive Zen community; conditions very unlike the familial environment of the schizophrenic.

## PERSPECTIVES ON INTERACTIONAL PARADOXES

If we have taken the long way around to come to the point of interactional paradoxes, it is because we believe that only through some appreciation of the richness and complexity of the idea of paradox (and we have but skimmed the surface) can one exercise due caution in attempts to reduce the notion to more "manageable" operational formalisms. Something is inevitably lost in that process, but if we employ wisely our economies of reduction, perhaps we need not lose everything, or at least what is essential. Before sketching the critical patterns of interactional paradoxes that must be accounted for in any formalism, several preliminary points are in order.

### Paradox Is ("Just") an Idea

The truth lurking behind this banality is overlooked by those who attribute moral value to paradox, by those who rush to reify the construct, and by those who would give it the rank of an emergent *grande idee*.

In the medieval Church, paradox was associated with heresy, thus it was a devil term of sorts. Hobbes (1841, p. 304) wrote that "the Bishop speaks often of paradoxes with such scorn or detestation that a simple reader would take a paradox either for felony or some other heinous crime." Paradox was no less odious to Russell, who attempted to exorcise it from logic. Conversely, paradox has come to be regarded by some therapists as a sort of god term for therapeutic interventions. Such judgments miss the point, for there is nothing within the structure of paradox *per se* to indicate whether it is a double bind or double blessing; whether it will precipitate madness or art (or both).

And paradox is not some "thing" which is "in" a situation that can be counted like so many phonemes. Paradox is in the eye of the beholder, a term that can be used to describe a pattern of interaction. Paradox is a qualitative concept, exceedingly difficult to quantify because of its diachronic multilevel nature, as most double-bind researchers have discovered. Paradox is a way of looking at or framing communication and behavior, it is not immanent in the behavior itself. When incorporating any new idea, there is a tendency to "see it everywhere" for a while. But an idea that explains everything explains nothing at all very usefully. On the other hand, to insist on strict operationalism may deprive the concept of paradox of the heuristic power and charm which attracts us to it in the first place. The task of delineating patterns of interactional paradoxes must proceed with care if the idea is to be useful in research while preserving its conceptual integrity.

human communication and is most appropriately viewed as normative rather than deviant behavior.

### PARADOX: CHARMS AND CHALLENGES

Oscar Wilde captured the charm of the paradox when he reputedly quipped that "a paradox is a truth standing on its head to attract attention." It is probably unnecessary to expound here on the charm of the paradox (see Falletta, 1983, Hofstadter, 1979; Hughes & Brecht, 1975). Moreover, it is likely impossible, with any didactic attempt destined for the same tedium as explaining a joke. Rather, the challenge of paradox for communication theory, research, and teaching is more to the point, for attention to interactional paradoxes challenges at least four assumptions of conventional wisdom.

First is the assumption that ideas are to be judged by a binary truth criterion: Ideas are either true or false (given some probability factor), and certainly not true *and* false. But here we run into the first problem with paradox, for as Bateson (cited in Brand, 1974, p. 31) remarked, "a paradox is an argument in which you take sides—both sides," and as Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967, p. 188) more formally suggested, "Paradox may be defined as a contradiction that follows correct deduction from consistent premises." The fact remains, as Alan Watts (1957) pointed out, that Western thinking is predominantly true/false and either/or rather than both/and. Binary thinking sets the stage for paradox by denying the validity of contradiction as a legitimate form of thought. From this perspective, paradoxical statements always represent something to be overcome, rather than standing for a peculiar form of truth in their own right. The "both/and" sort of logic said to characterize Eastern thought helps to explain why paradox as we conceive it is not problematic in Eastern philosophy, although the Western mind "finds," for instance, the discipline of Zen rife with paradox, especially in the teaching device of the Koans. Actually, there is no concept in Chinese or Japanese that even approximates the Western notion of paradox, although the Chinese character meaning *mujun* (*mu* = the spear that can pierce anything; *jun* = the shield that can deflect anything) conveys a similar notion of confusion.

A second challenge paradox presents is to the deep-rooted assumption that "man is a rational being." The "good man speaking well" in rhetorical theory has always been a creature of eminent *logos*, given to appeals of unreason (the classical *pathos*) only with some reluctance. This is not to suggest that reason is an inappropriate model of behavior, but rather to suggest in good company that at least syllogistic reason may be a grossly inadequate model of interpersonal logic. Paradox appeals to other than the common opinion, while paradoxically and often unnervingly making a sort of "uncommon

### **Interactional Paradoxes Should Be Defined Interactionally**

It is ironic, given the widespread lip service paid to interactional/transactional/systemic views of communication, that research vocabulary is still so heavily lineal and monadic. The tendency to view paradox as something that a parent does to a child or therapist does to a patient is thus natural and very strong. After all, it is easier to model lineal causality than circular causality; systemic definitions are exponentially complex. The structure of interactional paradoxes is appropriately viewed as more enthymemic (where the terms that comprise the paradoxical pattern are distributed throughout the relationship) than syllogistic (where the pattern is unilaterally imposed by one person on another).

For instance, if contradiction is considered to be a critical dimension of interactional paradoxes, the contradiction does not reside "within" the messages that one person conveys to another, but rather is the result of the interaction between messages of often very different sorts within a given context. If a mixed message is not interpreted and responded to as mixed, for interactional purposes it is not mixed at all. The pattern of paradox is a relational pattern; a crude "epistemological matrix" that stands as a prototypical interactional form. However fuzzy this form may appear under the scrutiny of scientific standards, it offers a glimpse of the shape that interactional concepts may take.

### **Patterns of Interactional Paradoxes**

Any formalism presuming to model interactional paradoxes must account for the better part of at least three interdependent levels of patterns: structural patterns of logical description, relational patterns that frame the enactment of structural patterns, and contextual patterns that frame both relational and structural levels, while in turn being created by them.

**Structural Patterns.** The terms of description for logical paradoxes (self-reference, contradiction, vicious circularity, and proscription of conventional choice) can be mapped onto interactional paradoxes only if considered functionally within relational and contextual frames. There is nothing within the structure of paradox itself that suggests anything about its pragmatic consequences, although this is no reason to abandon logical terms of description altogether in favor of defining paradox only in the broadest sense as something "contrary to opinion." Optimally, any middle-level theory of interactional paradox will retain relatively rigorous terms of description while tying these inescapably to relational matters.



**Relational Patterns.** Interactional paradoxes occur (or, more accurately, are observed to occur) within the context of a relationship. The patterns of logical paradox take on pragmatic meaning only within this matrix. Consideration of interactional paradoxes must take into account at the very least relationship intensity, relational control and power patterns, the relative salience and persistence of a given message exchange within the relationship, and the metacommunicative skill and tolerance for ambiguity of the interactants. All messages may be equal to an interactional coder, but surely in "real life" some messages are more equal than others.

On the one hand, if one can imagine a highly salient paradoxical message frequently repeated within a high-intensity relationship in which power is unequal and metacommunicative (reframing) ability and tolerance for ambiguity are limited, one has the classic conditions for a double bind. However, the same paradoxical message (from a logical point of view) might have no effect whatever as a low-salience, low-frequency message in a low-intensity relationship in which power is distributed equally and metacommunicative ability and tolerance for ambiguity are high. A "perfect" logical paradox may not even have any pragmatic effect as a high-salience message in a high-intensity relationship if metacommunicative ability and tolerance for ambiguity are high.

Take the following example of a variation on the "Be Spontaneous" paradox theme:

Wife: Tell me I'm not getting old and dowdy.

Husband: You're not getting old and dowdy.

Wife: You're just saying that.

Logically, this is a fairly strong paradox (or at least fairly strongly "paradoxical"), but relational cues suggest that the pragmatic effect will not be great, probably because it is not framed as an especially salient message within the relationship (although, of course, we cannot know), and power is likely to be evenly distributed.

However, consider this structurally identical paradox:

Parent: Tell me that you love me.

Child: I love you.

Parent: You're just saying that.

Given even the few relational inferences we may confidently make from such limited information, this paradoxical exchange is likely to have far stronger pragmatic consequences, for we know that power is unequal, the relationship is intense, love messages are usually very salient, and reframing ability—

at least on the part of the child—is probably limited. Of course, we do not “know” any of this in either hypothetical case, but that is not quite the point. The point is that structurally identical paradoxes according to any terms of logical description are pragmatically meaningless (or at least undecidable) unless framed within larger patterns of relationships.

**Contextual Patterns.** Relational patterns, in turn, are framed by larger patterns of time, social context, and one’s observational stance. The context of research, the context of education, the context of therapy, the context of politics, and one’s point of view within each context create the varied meanings and practical outcomes of otherwise isomorphic relational patterns.

Contextually imbedded rules and norms often conceal implicit premises that serve as the ground for the figure of an interactional paradox. For instance, in observing a therapist who employs a series of paradoxical restraining strategies such as “I doubt if I can do much for this problem,” “I’d be skeptical of any improvement,” or “You’re improving too rapidly,” the paradoxical nature of the message is lost unless it is understood that implicit within the context of therapy is a premise something like “the therapist is an expert problem solver who will support your efforts to change as quickly as possible.” Now it is possible to see the contradiction of restraining strategies that suggest that the therapist will help by not helping and will promote change by discouraging it.

Although it is neither probable nor desirable to know everything about a context, certainly something must be known in order to render action comprehensible. Strict “behavioral” approaches to research that discourage more than minimal inferences from data surely suffer by denying the inevitability of the interpretative processes of the observer.

The scholar is the inventor of the context of research, charged with creating the most plausible and humane fictions from among the intricate plots of frequently competing story lines. Do the properties of this observer enter into the description of his observations? Howe and VonFoerster (1975, p. 1) wrote that:

The logic of our Western industrial corporate society (with limited liability) is unidirectional, deductive, competitive, and hierarchical, and the keystones of its paradigm are the Claim to Objectivity and the Theory of Types, which exclude in principle the autonomy of paradox and of the individual. In the scientific revolution that we now create and experience, however, we perceive a shift from causal unidirectional to mutualistic systemic thinking, from a preoccupation with the properties of the observed to the study of the properties of the observer.

Part of any contemporary consideration of contextual patterns must begin to address issues of the observer, allowing that there is more to the research enterprise than clinical detachment.

Now, in considering this interdependent web of structural, relational, and contextual patterns of interactional paradoxes, what implications for further study emerge? The pressure to produce "results" in research (especially quantifiable results) is strong, and any possibility of operational formalism is sure to be exploited. This is the path of conventional revisionism in social and behavioral science, and crowded as the path may be with bodies of bright ideas led down it ("credibility," "cognitive dissonance," "self-disclosure," "ego-involvement," "communication apprehension," etc.), it is the way that most know best. There is a certain ephemeral security in being able to "tie an idea down" even knowing, as did Wordsworth, "we murder to dissect." But paradox will put up a good fight. For those who choose to tangle in this fashion, their work is cut out (albeit in the form of a Mobius strip).

Alternatively, in resisting the temptations of operational monism one can use paradox in one way as an early crude model for the shape that interactional concepts might take, moving then laterally to develop similarly rich metaphors in an aformalistic spirit of discovery. Or one might move to enlarge, rather than reduce, the idea by exploring its descriptive power at many different levels over a wide range of contexts.

Whatever the case, an idea that has endured for 2,500 years in philosophy is likely to survive whether relegated to the dark side of interpersonal communication or viewed more properly held up to the light.

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