The Two Beginnings of Communication Theory

Wolfram Lutterer

Sometimes it takes a while until matters of course become matters of course. The case of Bateson's communication theory is one of these. The following essay attempts to explore two quite different beginnings of communication theory. This will be achieved by comparing the texts of Gregory Bateson and of Paul Watzlawick.

The beginning of Bateson's communication theory dates to 1951. In that year Bateson published together with the psychiatrist Jurgen Ruesch, "Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry" (Ruesch and Bateson, 1951). In this book Bateson initiated the beginnings of a modern and today widely absorbed communication theory which until today still remains often unconnected with his name. He introduced several terms, such as 'metacommunication' or 'analogic and digital communication', which are now considered common currency. It was also the first time that modern cybernetics and information theory were extensively used in social science.

The success of his book was remarkably muted. It took as long as seventeen years until a second edition was published in 1968. In the meantime Bateson had become a well-known researcher, especially in the field of pathogenic communication. One year before this second edition of *Communication,* Paul Watzlawick published together with Janet B. Bavelas and Don D. Jackson (a former assistant of Bateson) his famous "Pragmatics of Human Communication" (Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson, 1967). The great achievement of *Pragmatics* was to present a formalized theory of communication, culminating in the five famous axioms of communication. Incidentally, this book was dedicated to Gregory Bateson. The publication of *Pragmatics* was the second, somehow different and much more successful beginning of communication theory.

The task of this essay is to present all of Watzlawick's five axioms as derived from insights already achieved by Bateson (or Ruesch). The similarities as well as the differences will be shown. This will be mainly done by quotations of crucial statements from both of them. Hereby I will limit my role to some hints instead of a broader discussion of this case (cf. Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 27-29; Lutterer, 2000, p. 276-281).

The Range of Communication

Watzlawick's first axiom simply states: "one cannot *not* communicate" (Watzlawick et al, 1967, p. 51). This shows the inevitability of communication. As few people know a very similar thought had already been formulated by Bateson's co-author, Jurgen Ruesch: "We can never abstain from communicating" to which Ruesch appended "... and as human beings and members of a society, we are biologically compelled to communicate" (Ruesch and Bateson, 1951, p. 7). I think the similarities of these statements are as remarkable as the differences. Whereas Watzlawick asserts something *objective,* a matter of fact, Ruesch's formulation is *reflexive,* including the observer. So it is small wonder, that Fritz B. Simon finds in the epilogue of the German edition of Bateson's and Ruesch's *Communication,* that this book already introduces the idea of the observer as in second order cybernetics (Simon, 1995, p. 315). In fact, we here have also the core of latter debates about the concept of „power" in psychotherapy (e.g. Lipset, 1980, p. 224-227).

Metacommunication

The second axiom of the *Pragmatics* is: "Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication" (Watzlawick et al, 1967, p. 54). Bateson's definition of metacommunication in *Communication* is: "We shall describe as 'metacommunication' all exchanged cues and propositions about (a) codification and (b) relationship between the communicators" (Ruesch and Bateson, 1951, p. 209). Again Watzlawick uses central statements of *Communication.* But here both agree about the meaning of metacommunication with the sole difference being the accent on "content" in one and on "codification" in the other.

Sequences of Interaction

Watzlawick's third axiom stresses the punctuation of communication. "The nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants" (Watzlawick et al, 1967, p. 59). Bateson, on the other hand, analyses 'sequences of interaction': "...the persons concerned in the interaction actually have a curious freedom to impose their own interpretations upon the sequences of interaction" (Ruesch and Bateson, 1951, p. 219). One favouring 'contingence' and the other 'freedom', again both mean essentially the same. Bateson demonstrates this 'freedom' with a comparison of dominance and dependence. Watzlawick elaborates on 'contingence' with an example of relationship struggles: Who started the struggle? Always the opponent.

Digital and Analogic Aspects of Communication

The fourth axiom formulates the differentiation between digital and analogic aspects in

communication. Watzlawick: "Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically. Digital language has a highly complex and powerful logical syntax but lacks adequate semantics in the field of relationship, while analogic language possesses the semantics but has no adequate syntax for the unambiguous definition of the nature of relationships" (Watzlawick et al, 1967, pp. 66-67). Instead of two "varieties of codification" Bateson even discusses a third - both 'digital' and 'analogic' and also 'Gestalt' (Ruesch and Bateson, 1951, p. 170-71). Later, however, he abandons the last one and simply distinguishes "analogic versus digital communication" (Bateson, 1966, p. 372). But this distinction is not a simple one: "In the natural world, communication is rarely either purely digital or purely analogic" (Bateson, 1968, p. 291). Again, both assert essentially the same. But again, Watzlawick' version is somehow diminished.

The Symmetry of Interaction

The fifth and final axiom is about the symmetry of interaction. Watzlawick: "All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference" (Watzlawick et al, 1967, p. 70). This differentiation is founded on an early theory of Bateson – his concept of *schismogenesis* which is essentially the same as later *positive feedback*. Bateson's concept dates back to 1935: "The possibilities of differentiation of groups are by no means infinite, but fall clearly into two categories (a) cases in which the relationship is chiefly symmetrical, *e.g.*, in the differentiation of moieties, clans, villages and the nations of Europe; and (b) cases in which the relationship is *complementary*, *e.g.,* in the differentiation of social strata, classes, castes, age grades, and, in some cases, the cultural differentiation between the sexes" (Bateson, 1935, p. 67). This assumption was the key to Bateson's early study on the Iatmul, a tribe of former headhunters, in New Guinea analysed in *Naven* (Bateson, 1936). Later, Bateson also applied this theory to Hitler's Germany. Again, all the same? No, not really. Bateson gives just categories of *description*, Watzlawick goes a step further and argues that *all* interchanges are „either symmetrical or complementary". So there is either competition or dominance/submission, at least for Watzlawick.

Conclusion

So as you see there really are two kinds of beginnings of communication theory. On the whole Bateson and Watzlawick often seem to mean the same, but only from a distant view. Every axiom of Watzlawick's *Pragmatics* is rooted in Bateson's theory and to a certain extent in Ruesch's theory. But Bateson himself abstains from a formal connection of his insights. He delivers no theory as a whole. It is to Watzlawick's credit that he brought all aspects together, conjoined and published them at the very moment when public perception was ready to absorb. I will leave it to you whether you understand Watzlawick's assumptions actually also

as „axioms". At least in mathematics axioms are *independent* from each other and they serve as a *necessary* starting point for further deducing.

So there are also the differences. Maybe the most significant one has its roots in the first „axiom". The different treatment of the observation and the observer herein is also the core of later developments in communication theory. Watzlawick's position is followed by directive family therapy (including Jay Haley and *NLP)* and basically, also by the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. Bateson's position is followed by non directive therapy (e.g. Paul F. Dell) and by Heinz von Foerster's second order cybernetics. However, both approaches are largely congruent. Due to the success of second order cybernetics Bateson's older approach may sound more recent, but Watzlawick's formulations are more familiar. And *this* also represents the main difference between them: The psychotherapist Paul Watzlawick usually remains in a position of first order cybernetics and this instead of his asserted constructivist view whereas Bateson is in second order from the start. So these two beginnings of communication theory really are *two* beginnings. The point of this essay was to demonstrate Bateson's involvement and to give him some credit.

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