# BriefTherapyUK

## Gregory Bateson & Brief Therapy

Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) was a British-born anthropologist who settled in California and worked in a diversity of fields: evolutionary biology, psychiatry, genetics, ethology, cybernetics and communication theory. His most important essays are collected in Steps To An Ecology of Mind. He was married to Margaret Mead and was friends with, amongst many others, John von Neumann, R. D. Laing, Warren McCulloch, Norbert Wiener, Jay Haley, John Weakland, Fritjof Capra, John Grinder, and Milton Erickson.

Bateson was a huge and sometimes unacknowledged influence on psychotherapy. This came originally from the research he did at the Veterans Administration Hospital, San Francisco and the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto, California in the 1950s. He set up what he called a small team which in fact became the birthplace of Systemic therapy. He was also the discoverer of the double-bind in communication and for important innovations in the treatment of alcoholism, dysfunctional families and schizophrenia. He urged the importance of observing non-verbal communication in therapy, and of the uses of metaphor, and was a supporter of Milton Erickson. He has influenced, amongst others The Palo Alto Group, The Milan School, Family therapy, NLP, Narrative therapy, and Brief therapy.

Bateson never himself put forward a theory of psychotherapy. He would probably have argued that such theories are misguided attempts to define the undefinable. Specifically, a theory of psychotherapy would, when applied by the therapist, come to define the situation it was invoked to explain. This would simply lead to circularity: the interpretations made by therapists would be proved true only because the therapy that resulted was predicted by the theory. Instead Bateson put forward several theories of mental process and hoped that psychotherapists would take their bearings from this. What follows is an attempt to summarise some important themes in his communicative theory that bear on the practice of psychotherapy.

### Map/territory distinction

Borrowing from Korzybskis work on General semantics, Bateson held that the ideas expressed in language do not have any direct referents in the external world. For example my idea of a banana could be an image of a yellow, bent fruit with a label next to it. This is clearly a re-presentation of the yellow things we conventionally name as bananas. Similarly, when I see something in a greengrocer which is yellow, bent and with white pulp in the middle I categorise it as something eatable, buyable and delicious. But none of these qualities need actually belong to the banana. Some might see it as inedible, expensive and repulsive. The banana in my thoughts is not the banana on the shop counter. The slogan for this is that the map is not the territory. Our perspectives are always changing, or always different between one person and another. We can produce an infinite series of maps, all of which reveal different aspects of the reality they model. Every map contains distinctions, beliefs, evaluations, judgments, injunctions and directions which are analogues of the external world.

The human tendency is to treat these maps as if they actually were reality. This gives rise to problems when clients become stuck in outdated or inadequate perspectives. In fact each map is only valid insofar as it a) contains premises shared by others, b) is communicable to other people, c) produces worthwhile results out there in the real world. If it is none of these it may still have validity as an innovative work of art but understanding may be problematic. If it does not have even that then it is most likely a type of private language accessible to no one but the speaker, who is eligible to become labelled as a psychotic.

## Logical typing

Russell and Whitehead showed that in mathematics impossible problems were created by treating classes of things as if they were things. For example, in the Cretan Liar paradox the Cretan says that all Cretans are liars. If his statement about Cretans (i.e. the class) is true, then the statement is false - as one specific (lying) Cretan person is saying this. To avoid confusion we must separate Cretans in general from individuals from Crete who go around making statements about their fellow Cretans. Bateson utilised this procedure as a way to avoid confusing different levels of abstraction when communicating. If one is talking about experiences then one should not stray into generalizations about experiences. Similarly, if one is dealing with concepts, one should not get them mixed up with the real-life examples we give for them.

Logical typing is closely connected with the map/territory distinction. If a map is not the territory then a name is not the thing named. Attempts to treat names, words and maps as if they were real produces confusion, paradox and communicative loops. But this is what human beings do - treating words like love, happiness and therapy as if they were concrete things. Unfortunately we all tend to attach different meanings to these terms and then act as if those meanings were transparent to everyone else. Then conflicts arise as we accuse each other of not living up to our words. We are disappointed when our maps of reality do not match up to the experiences we actually get.

Individually a different problem arises when we fail to separate our feelings, actions and thoughts from the labels we use to describe them. In therapy a person labelled as having depression may come to accept this as evidence for their illness, never exploring what their depressed sensations are all about. Therapists help clients though this loop by asking questions about what, specifically, is going on in the clients life and by helping them to be sceptical about catch-all labels that maintain the illness.

## Metaphor and representation

Bateson held that the outputs of mind (e.g. thoughts, images, memories) are metaphorical. They are fictions which, by convention, are held to represent external reality. Individual minds do not exist except through the interactions organisms have with their environment. For example, there are no coconuts in the brain, only ideas of coconuts which are symbolic (mostly linguistic) communications. For an idea to become mindful a succession of transformations (news of difference) are created in which wave movements impinging on the senses eventually come to be expressed as linguistic or imagistic descriptions. As therapists we need to continually be reminded that human interpretations are, culturally and personally mediated, constructions. As such they can always be modified.

Since we can never be sure that our representations are remotely similar to the clients, it follows that we must be continually checking and rechecking what we have heard and what we have understood. Batesonian therapists are careful to use the exact words received as these have the best chance of mirroring the clients representations. This skill is called pacing anothers map of the world.

## Abductive learning

Bateson argued that there existed another form of learning apart from deductive logic and inductive science. This is abductive learning in which we use analogies (or models) to compare one thing with something else. For example, when we compare the work of one therapist with another we begin to notice a pattern that connects the work of both. In noticing these common patterns we start to develop a richer model of the world. The search for the pattern that connects is common, Bateson held, to science, art, religion and psychotherapy.

Worthwhile psychotherapy encourages clients to consider their predicament from different points of view or, via, metaphor, in terms of other forms of experience. One reason Bateson used (sometimes obscure) stories when discussing ideas and giving lectures was the unique place he accorded to metaphor in learning. At one university class he placed a large crab on the table and invited his hearers to answer the question: how might we point to this crab as evidence of life on another planet (the answer lies in the evolutionary story that led to the symmetry proposed and denied by one claw being much larger than the other).

**Levels of learning**

In one of his most important papers, The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication, Bateson argued that human learning exhibits increasing levels of complexity and inclusiveness.

In Zero learning, which we share with most of the animal kingdom, no learning is shown; the organism simply responds to a stimulus through reflex action. The babys instinctive grasp of an outstretched thumb would be one example. Another example is the computers pre-programmed calculation of a sum.

On Learning level I, however, the child learns to distinguish between sets of responses and to choose the most appropriate. At the very least the individual can choose not to respond. Crucial to this stage of learning is habituation: people begin to notice that some stimuli (e.g. red traffic lights) are always the same and to develop the habitual response (stopping). Returning to the computer analogy we can program the machine to select different ways of calculating $x + y = 7$.

On Learning level II we get the gathering together of sets of alternative responses for different contexts. For example I might have learned to respond to social gatherings with a set of behaviours that include telling jokes, smiling, remaining silent, handing round drinks, and greeting newcomers. I use this interchangeably according to the way I have learned to assess the needs of the moment in that context. Here people can begin to transfer learning from one context to another. So the responses I have learned at school can be adapted to suit those of the office; the responses I learned from a perhaps painful relationship with my parents I may carry over to my transactions with friends and partners. A computer analogy for this would be a chess programme that gathers information about past games to make moves in the current game.

On Learning Level III we see human creativity emerge. Learning level II is very much about cultural training. In it we learn to become the human beings we are with all our strengths and flawed characteristics. But on Level III we question who we are and the way in which our culture has made us what we are. This, as Bateson points out, is the province of psychotherapy (as well as religion). We examine the unconscious assumptions that determine the Self. However, there is a danger here in that our entry onto Level III may entail a breakdown of the Self such as occurs in psychosis. To circumvent this danger it is necessary to have available a creative discipline such as those available to artists and poets, a religious discipline such as Zen Buddhism, or the controlled processes of psychotherapy. If a computer could reach this level we would have true artificial intelligence.

The Systemic view

In Batesons theory of mind the person, idea, or action does not exist independently of the relationship or context in which it is distinguished. Your interpretation of what is wrong with your client will be partly due to the way in which that same client presents in her relationship with you.

Thus therapists are implicated in the settings they seek to describe and interpret. For example, if I assume that the client is suffering from borderline personality disorder I will start to notice how his behaviour fits my diagnosis. Responding to subtle cues given out by me the client will fall in with the way I am punctuating his performances. Before long he, too, will recognise himself as having a personality disorder.

In the same way, such things as cures, change, symptoms and resolution will be functions of therapeutic settings, and the actions of therapists who seek to understand these things. Since clients as well as therapists are continually reinterpreting the contexts in which they operate this means that one encounter will always be different in quality from the next. It means, also, that therapy has only a limited influence over clients predicaments; these will be constantly altering under the impact of work, friendships, family and personal interaction.

## Ecology and context

All problems were once solutions - each one makes sense given the context it was designed to operate in. To understand why problems continue to exist we must take into account their purposes (positive intentions) within the context in which they arose. Only when we have understood this can we hope to discover new ways to think, feel and act which are better (i.e. more adaptive) than the old ones. A related word for context is frame. Good therapists are attentive to the frames clients use to make sense of the problem, and often seek, to expand, replace or modify them.

The therapists job (in a Batesonian approach) would be to facilitate change by gathering information about clients purposes, the context in which they operate, offering new descriptions, and providing (safe) ways for them to achieve their goals on feedback principles

## Implications for Brief therapy

If clients (like therapists) present with problems which result from their maps of reality, then it follows that the therapists job is to work with them to a) establish how the present map works and b) find new maps of the world, or at least to enrich the old one.

## Working with present maps

A crucial initial step rests on feedback principles. In positive feedback the results of ones actions confirm their rightness and call for more of the same. In negative feedback results are negative and call for less of the same. However, it is surprising how often people dont actually notice the results of their actions, or dont make links between the problems they experience and the actions they take (or dont take). It is the therapists job to clarify the results of present actions and to explore what new actions are required. This works both within the therapy session and outside it. In the office the therapist notices what clients do when they perform the problem, asks for information about thoughts and feelings, and reflects these back to the client for understanding. Therapists will also pay careful attention to the exact words used to describe the problem, and the way in which language contributes to it. For example, some clients limit themselves with the words have, and must. Other clients over-generalize difficulties with words like every and always while still others label themselves in unhelpful ways with words like stupid, hopeless and bad.

Throughout the therapist acts as a mirror in which clients receive back information about what they do and the consequences of doing more of the same. Outside the office clients are asked to engage in agreed tasks in which they notice differences between times when problems seem overwhelming and times when problems seem soluble. In doing so they uncover information about their personal resources. They may also be asked to experiment with new behaviours.

Often clients are unaware of the assumptions they are making about themselves, others and the world they live in. Therapy surfaces these presuppositions and allows clients to examine them from multiple perspectives. Some useful ways of looking at assumptions include:

a) How were they acquired and why is it important to continue to abide by them?
b) How consistent are they with the goals, values and needs which call to be satisfied?
c) How productive are these assumptions? Do they lead to unnecessary limitations and misery or are they products of the best map of the world available to the client?

Batesonian therapy also helps clients get clear about the labels they apply to themselves: anxiety case, psychotic, depressive and bulimic. These are really assumptions in disguise  catch-all terms which are picked up from psychiatrists, parents, partners or from therapy culture in general. By unravelling the meaning of these labels in terms of the actions, behaviours, thoughts and feelings which are actually experienced clients become free to notice what they do, how they do it, and the contextual triggers which activate their responses. This frees them up for new choices  or enables them to gain insight into the way their problems are constructed. This also enables them to distinguish between ideas which are true by convention (e.g. once an alcoholic always an alcoholic) and personal truths (e.g. I find it difficult to stop after my first drink as my need for oblivion overpowers me).

**Working with new maps**

When working with the terms clients use to describe their preferred state of affairs the Brief therapist is specific in defining exactly what is meant  in action language  by the goals the client has in mind to pursue. For example: a client states that she wants to improve her relationships with other people. In action language she would be asked to focus on one individual with whom she wants to get on better terms. Then to go on to specify what will be different about the way she is with this person: the way she speaks, looks at him, deals with unwanted behaviour, and resolves conflict. Most of all she will be asked to focus on the end-result of these changes: the criteria she will use for deciding that her relationship has indeed improved. After that her relationships with other individuals can be worked on. However, it is a curious fact that clients often find they are able to make spontaneous changes in the way they approach others once they have revised their approach in a single relationship. In Batesonian language they have learned how to learn to handle relationships.

Very often clients have prior experience in achieving their goals, or at least positive experiences to report in achieving similar goals. These experiences are utilized to the full by the therapist. Sometimes the client is out of options and attention then turns to looking at the map of the wold held by the client in which change seems difficult. As a rule it is necessary to go to a higher level of learning in order to achieve this.

There are a number of ways in which maps of the world can be reviewed or changed, some of which are mentioned by Bateson himself. The first is to examine the assumptions and beliefs carried by the client: ideas about self, about possibilities and about others.

Linked to this are cognitive change techniques which challenge old beliefs by looking hard at the evidence for them, or at their value in producing useful results. Also useful are approaches that look at the cultural assumptions the client has bought in too and which fuel the ideas she has developed. One important approach which is gaining popularity is narrative therapy, which looks at the personal and cultural life-stories that trap clients into stereotypical roles and illnesses.

A second is to engage in new behaviour which takes the client outside the old map and which implicitly presupposes new possibilities. For example, a client who has learned to see himself as a needy, dependent person might be asked to try some small exercises in self-assertion. Doing this undermines old ideas and creates the foundations for new ones.

A third way is to (humorously) exaggerate the old way of doing things in a way that brings their absurdity into sharp relief. This was a common tactic employed by Erickson. In one case he asked a boy with tantrums to turn up the volume and complained that he couldnt hear his yelling. He also told him that his tantrums werent inventive enough. After several sessions of trying out every form of abuse he could think of the boy grew tired of his behaviour and gradually learned to calm down.

The final way takes place through abductive learning in which the clients own map is compared, implicitly or explicitly, with those of others. Explicit comparisons utilize modelling, empathy, and dialogue. Implicit comparisons use metaphor.

Modelling works through an imaginative construction of new actions. These may be observed in others and then imitated and adapted by the client. For example, one client complained of difficulties at work with a tyrannical boss. This person was demanding, rude and intolerant of small mistakes. When she was asked whether she knew of anybody who handled this person well she recalled that one employee would regularly stand up to this man. She would remain calm and polite but would point out that his demands were not in the best interests of efficiency. After a while the boss had developed a respectful attitude he rarely showed to anyone else. The client was tasked to go and talk to her colleague and find out how she did it. Later she agreed to implement, on a smaller scale, two or three things she had learnt, with some success.

Empathy is also partly imaginative in the way it works. It means putting oneself in the shoes of another person and, so far as humanly possible, to see situations from that perspective. This therapeutic exercise works particularly well when the client is in conflict with someone else, or in couple therapy. Without making any prior judgment the client learns to see himself as he behaves when conflict arises. The next step is to objectively examine what behaviours need to be modified in order to make conflict less likely in the eyes of the other person, without giving up the values and interests of the client.

Dialogue is the means through which the therapists map of the world interacts with the clients. The therapist does not insist on the rightness of her perspective and will make it clear that, in some contexts, the client will have a more productive view than any the therapist may have. Nor is the client an expert on the clients problem. However, having acquired some therapeutic expertise and training, and supplemented this with reading, reflection and resourcefulness in the face of her own difficulties, the therapist will have some useful perspectives of her own to offer. Taking a cue from one of Batesons favourite quotations (from William Blake) Without contraries there is no progression, she will be ready to offer suggestions, reflections, surmises, questions, challenges and stories. Naturally, she will seek to understand as much as to be understood.

*Metaphor* is the implicit comparison of one thing with another. Through this medium the therapist relates stories, similes and anecdotes which partly mirror some aspect of the clients predicament while also conveying different implications. For example if one client is experiencing depression the therapist could go on to reflect how summer dies away into autumn which then gives way to the chill of winter. However, the winter season is itself a preparation for springÖ..by these means the implied message (which the client can receive in different ways) is that depression is a hibernation period before a phase of renewal.

In generating indirect comparisons therapist and client create the conditions for abductive learning: the emergence of new patterns of thought and feeling as clients view their position from many different perspectives.

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