10   The Double-Bind in Relational Practice

The theory of the double-bind was initially forwarded by a group of individuals, Gregory Bateson, Don Jackson, Jay Healy and John Weakland, in the paper *Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia* (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956). It was based upon their intersecting work at Stanford University between 1952-1954 in the fields of anthropology, psychiatry, biological evolution and genetics and on epistemology emanating from systems theory and ecology. The multidisciplinary approach of Bateson was reflected in the work of other colleagues at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto, California. There Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin and Don Jackson worked with the complexities of human communication - one of Bateson's central concerns - and developed his work on the double-bind and paradoxical communication (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The work of R.D. Laing at the Tavistock Clinic in the area of psychiatric care also drew upon and informed the importance of relationship in human communication that was being forwarded by the Palo Alto group. For example he suggested that the individual patient needed to be considered in terms of the modes of interpersonal experience and action (Laing, 1969).

Since the development of these ideas in the field of psychotherapy they have been used for describing human relationships in a number of contexts, including organisational/behavioural sciences and political thinking as well as psychiatry. In particular Carlos Sluzki and Eliseo Veron's paper *The Double-Bind as a Universal Pathogenic Situation* (1971) has been suggested to be instrumental in expanding the double-bind theory beyond the study of schizophrenic situations to more general neuroses, such as hysteria, phobias and obsessive compulsives. However, in the following work I use the original conceptualisations of the theory for, as one of the original authors Weakland subsequently suggested, some interpretations have misunderstood the essence of their re-conceptualisation of schizophrenia (1977).

In this chapter I will initially set out the theory of the double-bind and some underlying notions relating to human communication. I then go on to link these ideas with the relational praxes that I described in Section IV to see how this particular perspective might be a useful place from which to consider our understanding of participation in the context of sustainability.

10.1 The pragmatics of human communication

Bateson's conceptualisation of the double-bind uses communication theory to explore the scenario of a young child who develops trauma through repeated communicative reversals and difficulties in relation with her parents (Bateson, 1972). The particular innovation of this work was picked up by Watzlawick et al (1967) who criticised monadic views of the individual and the underlying method of isolating variables in the behavioural sciences. Whilst previous theory and practice isolated the "mentally ill" and diagnosed *the patient* as schizophrenic, the suggestion here was that the "observer of human behaviour…turn from an inferential study of the mind to the study of the observable manifestations of relationship" (Watzlawick et al., 1967: 21). As a result schizophrenic conditions could be seen as a function of relationship between parties and not an internal condition of the party itself.

One of the aspects underlying this shift was a concern with communication and, more specifically, the "pragmatics" of human communication. The perspective differentiates between three areas of communication:

- syntactics where problems of communication are viewed in terms of the *transmission of information;*
- semantics where the focus of attempts to understand communication revolves around the transmission of *meaning*;
- pragmatics where the *behavioural effects* of communication are figural.

With respect to this third form, Weakland et al remark that

> "the two terms communication and behaviour are used virtually synonymously. For the data of pragmatics are not only words, their configurations, and meanings…but their nonverbal concomitants and body language as well. Even more, we would add to personal behavioural actions the communicational clues inherent in the context in which communication occurs. Thus, from this perspective of pragmatics all behaviour, not only speech, is communication, and all communication - even the communicational clues in an impersonal context - affects behaviour" (Watzlawick et al., 1967: 22).

I have found that such a perspective gives a brush that is broad enough and a range of colours that are evocative enough to allow us to enter the theoretical world of participatory praxis and

map some of the territory (all the while noting that access to the "territory" pure and proper was and never is possible outside of the mental maps of world). Such a behavioural-communication couplet allows certain conceptual changes to be made that would not be possible when communication is regarded as solely syntactics or semantics (Watzlawick et al., 1967). In considering the behavioural aspects of communication Laing cautions that we are

> "not intending to give a balanced account of actual relationships, but are trying to illustrate possible disjunctive relationships. We are trying to describe how one person or 'nexus' of persons can act towards another. How persons 'act towards' one another may have little to do with motives, or intentions, or with actual effects on the other" (Laing, 1969: 147, italics in original).

As may be recalled, in chapter 3 I noted that research into NGO-business collaboration has seemed unable to get to grips with the processes of interaction inside the "black box" of these relationships. To be sure, there have been attempts to describe some of the complexity of such relationships, including my own. Watzlawick et al (1967) suggest that sometimes it may be more expedient to disregard attempts at studying the internal structure of the literal and metaphorical "black box". Instead they suggest that by studying input-output relations one can take a perspective that focuses upon the communication undertaken within the system. This approach views symptoms of the "patient" as one kind of input into the system.

One of the results of such a perspective is that one can "search for pattern in the here and now rather than for symbolic meaning, past causes or motivation" (Watzlawick et al., 1967: 45). This search for pattern in the-here-and-now allows us to move away from an attachment to finding the "all-important beginning" of a linear chain of causality or inference from a "few scraps of patient's speech isolate from circumstances" (Weakland, 1977). Instead we can work with the image of a circle of communication in which there is no ending or beginning. If behaviour is understood from this circular communicative point of view, they suggest, it then becomes important to study the behaviour in the contexts of communication (both the learning context and the immediate interactional context) (Weakland, 1977) in which it occurs. So we see that "the patient's condition is not static but varies with his interpersonal situation as well as with the bias of the observer" (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

10.2 Axioms of pragmatic communication

Before moving on to relate these ideas to the empirical relational practice described in the thesis through the double-bind I should like to note some important axioms of human communication, from which Bateson and his colleagues worked. First of all, as already suggested, the "pragmatic" perspective regards *all* behaviour as communication; the implication is that it is impossible to not communicate - everything one does or, for that matter, does *not* do is a form of communication; "one cannot *not* behave" (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

A second axiom concerns a distinction between contrasting levels of abstraction in communication. One can distinguish between messages that convey the content of any communication and messages that convey the kind of content that the communication is. This second form of message is meta-communication, communication *about* the communication or information *about* information. Meta-communication, then, points us towards the *relationship between* the speakers, telling the parties "how the communication is to be taken", rather than the *content* of the message. So, for example, throughout my presentation of this thesis I have sought to use a number of devices to define the relationship between you, as reader and co-inquirer and I, as author, that seek to avoid the dis-ingenuity of a positivist's attempts to maintain an dispassionate distance from his (sic) empty container/reader. The distinction between the relationship-defining elements and the content elements of a message may not seem apparent since every communication contains both aspects. While the emotional value in the ability to discriminate between orders of messages is significant, meta-communicative messages concerning relationship between speakers tend to remain implicit (Bateson, 1972:210).

Despite (or perhaps, because of) this, the ability to "meta-communicate appropriately is the *conditio sine qua non* of successful communication. However, importantly it is also intimately linked with the enormous problem of awareness of self and others" (Watzlawick et al., 1967: 53, italics in original). Differences between communication, meta-communication, meta-meta-communication, and so on, are based on Bertrand Russell's Theory of Logical Types, which suggests that there is a "discontinuity between a class and its member. The class cannot be a member of itself nor can one of the members be the class, since the term used for the class is of a different level of abstraction - a different Logical Type - from the terms used by the members" (Bateson, 1972:202).

A related distinction to the content-relationship couplet is that between analogic and digital communication. Digital communication is representation based upon a *name* which has no

simple correspondence to that for which the name stands. For example, the numeral '5' is not bigger than the numeral '3' and there is "nothing particularly five-like" in the number '5' (Bateson, 1972: 373). In contrast, in analogic communication "real magnitudes are used and they correspond to real magnitudes in the subject of discourse" (Bateson, 1972: 373) such that "there is something particularly 'thing-like' in what is used to express the thing" (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Drawing out Bateson's example, my ability to represent the numeral '5' with the four fingers and thumb on my hand is a simple piece of analogic communication in which instance there *would* be something particularly five-like in the communication. As a simple rule, verbal language is almost all purely digital, whereas virtually all non-verbal language is analogic. Analogic communication would, therefore, include "posture, gesture, facial expression, voice inflection, the sequence, rhythm and cadence of the words themselves and any other non-verbal manifestation of which the organism is capable, as well as the communicational clues unfailingly present in any *context* in which an interaction takes place" (Watzlawick et al., 1967:62, italics in original).

Analogic communication, working from representational likeness, has great difficulty in distinguishing between past, present and future and has no qualifiers to distinguish between types of meaning. On the other hand digital communication is more able to mould message material in these complex, versatile and abstract ways but has great difficulty in dealing with issues of relationship. The contrasting nature of these two types of communication poses a real difficulty in translating between one type and the other. Since, as suggested above, all communication contains both content and a relationship aspects, we can also add that analogic and digital communication "not only exist side by side but complement each other in every message" (Watzlawick et al., 1967) and therefore, there is a continual need for translating between them.

10.3 The double-bind

Working with these and other axioms Bateson described the dynamic of the double-bind theory with five conditions (1972: 201-227):

1) the involvement of two or more persons, one of whom may be called a victim;
2) an experience which recurs a number of times;
3) a primary negative injunction, in which a command is made by an outside authority with the threat of punishment for non-compliance;

4) a secondary injunction, which conflicts with an element of the first message but is of a different, usually more abstract, logical type, i.e. some type of meta-communication. Like the first injunction, the command is enforced by punishment or signals that threaten survival;

5) a third, negative injunction that means that the victim cannot leave the "field".

Watzlawick et al built upon this formulation to suggest that, in the context of an intense relationship which has a high degree of physical and or/psychological survival value for one or all parties, a message is given. This message is structured such that "(a) it asserts something and (b) it asserts something about its assertion and (c) these two assertions are mutually exclusive". The recipient or victim is prevented from meta-communicating about this frame or withdrawing from the relationship. When the double-bind is repeated continuously and chronically it becomes an autonomous expectation of relational communication and does not need to be reinforced. Meanwhile, the paradoxical behaviour that actually results from this situation is itself of a double-binding nature that therefore feeds into a "self-perpetuating pattern of communication" which "double-binds the double-binder" (1967: 211-219).

The result of such a situation is a "meta-communicative tangle" in which the individual becomes increasingly unable to discriminate between different logical types of message. With repeated occurrence of this attack upon the signals-that-identify-message-types an individual in an extreme situation is likely to develop severe ego weakness, for the "victim is caught in a tangle of paradoxical injunctions in which he cannot do the right thing" (Laing, 1969).

The oft-cited clinical example of the double-bind concerns a son who is visited by his mother shortly after he is recovering from a mental breakdown. As he approaches her, she opens her arms for them to embrace but then, as he gets nearer, she freezes and stiffens. Upon seeing this he stops. She asks "don't you want to kiss your mummy?" and, as he is still standing irresolutely, she adds "you know, you shouldn't be afraid of your feelings". The effect of his mother freezing provides the son with an analogic piece of communication that conflicts with the words that she speaks, the digital communication. Unable to make a comment about the inconsistencies in these different levels of communication, the boy is caught in a paradox from which he cannot escape; if he embraces her, then she will punish him; if he does not embrace, then she will also punish him. Laing goes on to note that prior to this the boy may have in fact double-bound his mother by some minute nuance in his approach that suggested *his* fear of closeness and to which she then *responded* with stiffness.

It has been suggested that the "schizophrenic patient" is not the only one to encounter such untenable positions. In fact, many everyday situations exhibit paradoxical injunctions where there is possible logical choice and choice itself is bankrupted (Watzlawick et al., 1967:62). The most banal example of the double-bind in everyday life would be the following billboard or placard:

IGNORE THIS SIGN

In the face of such a sign I have no choice - in order to obey it I must disobey it, but in order to disobey it I have already obeyed it. Equally paradoxical, suggests Laing, is the injunction "Be Spontaneous". In such situations, even if the message is logically meaningless, it is a pragmatic reality since I cannot *not* react to it nor can I react to it in a way that is appropriate and non-paradoxical. The result of these communicational paradoxes is that perception of inner and outer realities becomes distorted. In small, infrequent doses, where the communication is insignificant, I may be able to make a comment on the paradox or walk away from its distorting effects and thus escape the bind. However, for the schizophrenic reality becomes almost entirely composed of such paradoxes so that meta-communication and escape are impossibilities.

10.4   Shell, Living Earth and society - a network of double-binds

Let us now consider the "interpersonal" situation described empirically in this research through the lens of the double-bind situation and the Batesonian pragmatics of communication. The validity of translating the theory of the double-bind outside of personal interaction into inter-organisational context is, in part, forged because of the shift in focus away from the intra-psychic condition of the individual towards the communicational context of relationship. As John Weakland, one of the original authors of *Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia*, noted the article and their interest was essentially concerned with the relationships between behaviour and communication and therefore, also with a re-characterisation of "normal behaviour" and of the notions of "simple rationality" (Weakland, 1977).

In the following, I set out what I consider to be a network of double-binds that have fed upon one another and have seemed to created a self-perpetuating pattern of paradoxical communication in the midst of a web of associated relationships. This is not an attempt to "diagnose" or analyse each actor in turn as pathogenic. Instead I explore the proposition that

the pathogenic qualities are *in the relationships* themselves and reflect upon a pattern of communication that takes on a double-binding quality. This distinction is the essence of Bateson's double-bind theory, for the "pathogenicity cannot be answered in terms of cause and effect relationship…the double-bind does not *cause* schizophrenia. All that can be said is that where double-binding has become the predominant pattern of communication, and where the diagnostic attention is limited to the *overtly* most disturbed individual, the behaviour of this individual will be found to satisfy the diagnostic criteria of schizophrenia" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, italics in original). Thus, in shifting attention away from a focus on the condition of the individual person or organisation we can see schizophrenic communication patterns - "schizophreneze" - *in the relationships* involving Shell, Living Earth and myself. Clearly, in an organisational context this pathogenic quality of relationship can be manifested in the intra-organisational or extra-organisational communication, involving the nexus of individual, group or organisation.

For ease of reference in the following exposition I have given each of these binds a separate label.

10.4.1   Shell-society bind

One anchoring point in considering the pragmatic communication in this context would be that from which Shell began to consider its relationship with civil society and, more specifically, the social movement of sustainability during and subsequent to the various crises that the company faced during the 1990s. As described in chapter 3 many multinational companies have been facing the increasing power of the citizen's cane (Bendell, 1998) - pressures from civil society for increased corporate responsiveness and responsibility. Shell International and Shell Nigeria have perceived the pressures emanating from the fallout of Brent Spar and Ogoni as a message from civil society, particularly from outraged consumer markets in Europe, to be telling them that Shell have lost touch with "society's expectations". For Shell Nigeria and their operational problems this has been translated into an injunction which suggests that they need to re-embed themselves within a wider context, to act responsibly and begin "helping" their host communities with their own development and growth. However, as they have attempted to move closer to their host communities by increasing their investment in the community the response from vocal and critical sections of civil society in Nigeria (and internationally) has been contradictory.

The essence of the secondary contradictory message revolves around a fairly accepted dynamic in community development work, whereby the control of powerful elites is maintained through the creation and perpetuation of dependency. Robert Chambers' work on "uppers" and "lowers" resonates with concern for power dynamics that are played out in this kind of behaviour (1995; 1997). The notion of offering "help" to others thus conflicts with the needs of the community to feel ownership of their own livelihoods and to develop their own capacity for transformation and so acts as a secondary injunction that distorts the primary injunction. The two injunctions cannot be understood at the same level. A message concerning the lack of development in the communities is clearly understood by anyone who visits these communities - it is essentially an analogic piece of communication - and the resulting injunction about the need to foster change is quite explicit. Additionally, such a message which seems to suggest the need for helping others through the increased provision of funding occurs within the formal language of business. In contrast the secondary injunction is of a different logical type; it is not about help itself but concerns the *type of help* that is being offered and its appropriateness - thus it is a message *about* the message of Shell's responsibility to the communities, a message about the nature of Shell's relationship to the communities and society. The tertiary inhibiting injunction arises from the different logical typing of the primary and secondary injunctions; the result is the need to make a meta-comment about the difference. As I shall explore below, there are significant problems in translating such analogic communication about relationship into verbalised digital communication.

Thus, as Shell has attempted to put more money into the Delta in order to respond to the primary injunction from one "parent" - consumer markets and civil society in the West - it also finds a message from another "parent" - critical sections of civil society, development practitioners and the Delta communities themselves - that this form of response is inappropriate. The internal confusion within Shell that results from this bind is considerable. They are told that they must "help the communities", as well as being told that "if you help the communities you are not helping the communities". Initially, within Shell Nigeria there were attempts to root out bribery and corruption; presently, more money keeps being pumped into the community development activities. After the mid 1990's Shell International began to seek help in dealing with the bind in which it was tangled. For them, NGOs such as Living Earth provided potential value through association by relationship as well as practical assistance in dealing with the situation.

When Living Earth and Shell came together to work in partnership it was with an aim of re-orienting Shell's position with regard to the communities. One of the outputs from this

relationship (as well as the professionalisation of the community relations unit) has been to flag the need for Shell to work with communities in their development and treat them in a more participatory manner that would deal with the problems of ownership and accusations of false offers of "help". Thus:

> "That's what its all about in the end – are we actually helping the people and their quality of life, because if we aren't then all we are doing is rhetoric and bullshit." (Malcolm Williams 8 - SI)

> "So we felt people were running [from Nigeria] when they should be staying in. People need help when they're bobbing up and down in the water, rather than when they've got to the shore." (Roger Hammond 2 - LEUK)

> "Community development is supposed to provide at least some level of support and assistance to these people. I believe that is the goal of it. So if the money is not being well spent, it means that those people will remain the way the way they are." (Dara Akala 13 - LENF)

If these comments are considered closely one can perceive an on-going theme of providing help to the communities. At the same time the message that is being communicated by the management nexus of Living Earth and Shell concerns the re-orientation away from helping the communities towards becoming "Partners in Development"[1]. Thus, the overall communication that emanates from the collaboration of Shell and Living Earth is essentially that "we are involved in a participatory relationship oriented towards changing Shell from within, in order to reorient Shell's relationship with society - a relationship that we have newly reframed as one of 'participatory community development'". In addition to seeking advice and skills from Living Earth, Shell's response included the professionalisation of the community development department at Shell Nigeria. However, without dealing with the core issue of the status of "help" both moves have maintained and further extended the web of paradoxical communication.

It seems that there are at least two important double-binds involving two groups of audience/"victim" that flow from the message of this relationship.

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[1] This phrase comes from one of numerous leaflets and posters that I saw whilst at Shell in Nigeria. I found one particular poster almost amusing; while I was waiting to talk to Hubert Nwokolo in Port Harcourt I saw a poster on his wall on which the logo of Shell Petroleum Development Company (Shell Nigeria's formal title) and its well known

10.4.2 Extra-relationship bind

This bind involves two separate groups of parents - the Living Earth-Shell management nexus and critical/activist NGOs. These parents are sending paradoxical communication to the victim - society - about the nature of change taking place in the oil company. As one parent, the management nexus of Shell-Living Earth is seeking to communicate or signify something to the external audience of Western consumer markets and civil society through the very presence of a relationship. This message, coming from Living Earth and Shell, may read something like the following:

> "this is a progressive change-oriented relationship in which we are looking to transform the way that Shell relates to the wider community". The message might also add that "if you disrupt or challenge this relationship then you will be the kind of society that is not concerned with the welfare of the communities".

The secondary injunction to these same external audiences comes from another "parent" nexus - critical and activist NGOs - with a message that this relationship is not change-oriented nor progressive but is a form of co-optation and collusion; that, in proposing to change, Shell is not changing. This message is a comment about the *type of change* that is being forwarded, as opposed to change itself, and it thus of a higher level of abstraction to the primary injunction from Shell and Living Earth and therefore mutually exclusive to it.

In labelling the situation as one of collusion, the activists frame the orientation of the first parent towards change and progressiveness in terms of entrenching first-order changes, i.e. developments as opposed to second-order changes, i.e. transformations. The higher level abstraction of conversations about the type of change, where logical typing difference between first- and second-order change negates simple meaningful comparison, are harder for consumer markets and Delta communities to comment upon. Moreover, the possibility of discussing and meta-communicating about this difference (and leaving the bounded field) is further obfuscated by the indeterminacy of knowing about the effects of change (vis-à-vis the simple problem of knowing about what would have happened if these changes did not take place).

link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/r_shah.html

10.4.3 Intra-relationship bind

Another bind can be seen to take place within the Shell-Living Earth nexus with regard to communication that refers to the nature of their relationship with each other. The primary injunction coming from management of Shell and Living Earth is that "this is a *participatory* relationship/organisation that is oriented towards creating change". A whole net of interacting messages and meta-messages coming from various members of Shell and Living Earth, both in the UK and Nigeria, as well as the secondary injunction in the extra-relationship bind coming from critical NGOs, conflict with this primary injunction. These messages combine to suggest to staff that neither the outputs of relationship between the organisations nor the organisations themselves are participatory.

Living Earth's organisational mission, project documents and individual espoused theories are clear about the need to work with Shell (and other private sector organisations) in order to achieve their objectives in terms of sustainable development and environmental education. Similarly, the internal orientation towards organisational participation within Living Earth is well voiced and published. Within Shell, there are verbal and written statements about the need to work with other sectors of society, including NGOs. Organisational charts and other statements affirm that Shell Nigeria is an independent operating company of the Shell Group of Companies and that Shell International merely lends advice and strategic direction. Shell have made numerous other digital, verbal communications (for example, in the various project documents, internal and external publications or in statements by management) - messages of the primary injunction - that seek to convey a commitment to participatory relations between the two organisations.

However, in my encounters with and within all four organisations I noticed considerable uncertainty regarding the nature of the collaboration between the organisations and the extent to which the relationship could be considered participatory. For many of the staff their intimations of the practice and experience of participation seemed to contrast with the digitally conveyed messages about participatory relating within the organisations. However, it seems hard for them and external parties to talk about the secondary injunction with any certainty. A number of interviewees sought to comment on the personal dilemmas they experienced in coming to terms with the relationship with Shell. However, more significantly they demonstrated some of these difficulties in the midst of conversation. For example, one individual noted that he protested against Shell with regard to their involvement in the South African apartheid regime in the 1980s; it seemed that it was only while he told this story in the interview that he became aware of his surprise at working with Shell. Martin Roberts, who had

a background in participatory development work, had been recruited to Living Earth as a result of the Shell project and was closely involved in the relationship with Shell, was also troubled by the involvement and what it meant to him:

> Me: We've mentioned a couple of times what you feel and what you have to do in order to get your job done for the organisation. And there's tension there. We talked about how you talk about you're work with your friends. I'm trying to get an idea of how you experience that whole thing. Is there anything that comes to mind about how you deal with the contradictions you see?
>
> MR: PAUSE FOR 25 SECS THEN… you mean how do I bring together the standard phrases that I come out with to friends about the way I work with Shell and how I actually do it in reality?
>
> Me: Uh. Yeah.
>
> MR: Umm….PAUSES…I don't see ANOTHER 15 SECS. I suppose its because I don't really talk to my friends about how I deal with Shell particularly. What I do is I talk about why Living Earth [are involved] and allow myself to sort of distance myself a little bit from it…which is perhaps a little bit…unreasonable, but umm….PAUSE. I mean what I say about the work I do with Shell, I don't tell any lies its just that I don't go into any detail and I suppose I add a laugh of cynicism at the end of it all. And leave it at that. PAUSE (Martin Roberts - LEUK 1)

For those in Living Earth involved with Shell there seemed to be instances in which they questioned their collaborative stance with the organisation and sought to verbalise the personal and organisational implications. Additionally, during the time I spent at Living Earth I noticed that individuals who were not directly involved with the relationship tended to avoid the issue and ignore what it meant for them and the organisation by, for example, making a joke or parodying the situation. For the staff who were involved in the collaboration, signs that Shell were not engaging with Living Earth's agenda became difficult to reconcile with their espoused participatory stance:

> Me: You said the word partnership a couple of times in reference to your relationship with Shell; do you think you are in partnership with Shell?
>
> DA: What we call it…LAUGHS…that is the terminology that is being used both within LE and from Shell. But really, whether that is what it is…PAUSE…its questionable, whether it is a real partnership.

Me: So what do you think?

DA: Hmm.. to me to all intents and purposes, what is happening is that Shell has given us a grant to do a project. So beyond that I don't see any other thing….you know beyond the donor-grantee relationship. And so that is what is "called" a partnership. (Dara Akala - LENF 13)

Similarly, Deirdre Lapin's refusal to see me because she thought I had been sent from Shell International seems to communicate her concern about the control held by London offices over the activity of the community development department in Nigeria and about the nature of the relationship between Shell Nigeria, Shell International and Living Earth UK. However, not all members of relationship noted such contradiction; at Living Earth Roger Hammond seemed surprised that it should be an issue:

Me: Do you see any contradictions in working with Shell?

RH: What is there to contradict?

Me: Don't know, that's why I'm asking

RH: LAUGHS…Not really, because working with Shell, I mean working with Shell type entities is part of what we do as an organisation. We see three sectors, government, business and community and we see that community tends to be marginalised in many set ups and using that model we look to see if we can engage business and government sector in sustainable development programmes. We're not there representing or protecting communities, we look out for interests and sometimes we're a buffer, but we're not a democratic organisation in a way that we pretend that we can represent people who's lives we don't live. If we weren't trying to engage business then we'd be failing in our mission. (Roger Hammond - LEUK 2)

10.5 The ambiguity of communication

I notice that I would like to be in a more engaged and interactive relationship with you at this stage of description for I feel that what I am writing is slightly lacking in depth and meaning and is strong in vagueness. It seems that in seeking to communicate about these issues we - as sender and receiver - might be encountering similar difficulties in translation between what I *experienced* and what I am able to *communicate* verbally. This tectonic grinding between the "plates" of analogic and digital communication is one that I am suggesting participants in the relationship experienced as part of the "intra-relationship" double-bind.

According to the axioms of communication laid out above, messages concerning relationship are more conducive to analogic communication[2] (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick et al., 1967). Analogic messages about organisational relationships would be perceived in the intangible and implicit "postures", "stances" or "tones" of the organisations. Whilst information is always lost in the translation from digital to analogic, because of the former's greater access to complex and abstract concepts, *talking about* relationship also requires translation from the analogic experiential plane, from a perception of the posture or the aptness of contextual patterning. Watzlawick et al point out that there are considerable difficulties in the translation process, not least because "analogic material is highly antithetical; it lends itself to very different and often quite incompatible digital interpretations" (1967: 100). Thus, when the meaning of a particular piece of analogic communication is uncertain, as well as losing information in attempts to talk about the relationship, we also encounter far more space for the individual interpretations of both sender and receiver to take hold. These interpretations tend to reflect each party's idiosyncratic orientation towards the relationship.

Thus, the ambiguity of analogic communication and its meta-communicative form makes it harder to translate felt perceptions of genuineness or insincerity into the digital communication of verbal language. What may be said is that my experience with Martin, Dara, Deirdre and others working with the communities drew a picture of a felt paradox between one message, which said "if you work as part of this organisation you are the kind of person interested in the participatory development of the communities in the Delta", against another message, which said "if you work as part of this organisation you are *not* the kind of person interested in the participatory development of the communities in the Delta". Ultimately, the double-binds experienced by Martin and Gwen meant that they "left the field" - in itself a form of meta-communication to deal with paradoxical messages.

The uncertainty about the relationship and inability to show awareness of the contradiction or the real issue involved, expressed in both Martin's and Dara's comments above, also betray signs of the way in which Roger himself is double-bound by the paradoxical communication in the relationship. Watzlawick et al would likely propose that their (Martin and Dara's) inability to comment digitally, verbally and unambiguously upon the nature of the relationship and their paradoxical behaviour double-binds Roger. What should be noted then, is the self-

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[2] Bateson exemplifies the relative appropriateness of digital and analogic communication for issues of relationship: "when boy says to girl, 'I love you', he is using words to convey that which is more convincingly conveyed by his tone of voice and his movements; and the girl, if she has any sense, will pay more attention to those accompanying signs than to the

perpetuation of these binds, such that all involved are both double-binders and double-bound. Additionally, there is the almost forbidden nature of meta-commenting upon all of this, as communication becomes a form of "schizophreneze".

As suggested previously (section 10.2), the pragmatic view of human communication tells us that one cannot *not* communicate. Thus, attempts by victims of double-binds at not communicating can be quickly revealed as impossible. In such a circumstance the victim is said to engage in a form of communication - schizophreneze - which leaves it up to the listener to take his/her choice from among many possible meanings, which may be not only different from but also incompatible with, one another (Watzlawick et al., 1967: 73). The victim is thus able to achieve the second best to not communicating - communicating something which can easily be denied because of the pregnant plurality of meaning in the message. In the kind of inter-organisational context that I have been discussing such schizophreneze may be manifest in the departure of Martin, which could be interpreted in any number of ways depending upon our predilections and motives for deciphering such behaviour. For example, he may be seen making a pejorative comment about the relationship between Shell and Living Earth or he may be seen as manifesting a lack of concern for the communities from whose existential situation he removed himself.

We may also see that the tangles in the intra-relationship double-bind are fed by the two binds already described in such a way that the previous attribution of "victim" and "parent" is turned around. In the Shell-society bind, Shell, tangled up by the communication coming from society, is placed in the position of victim. Here, problems of translating between analogic and digital communication are evident once again. As Shell seeks to re-define its relationship with the communities, such that it would be a more accepted organisation within the Delta, it makes digital comments - in the form of monetary "gifts" and verbal/written commitments - about relational aspects. The difficulties encountered by Shell as a result of this translation are because of the inherent controversy in the meaning of their relationship to the communities. As Watzlawick et al suggest, when such verbalisation is attempted "either partner is likely to introduce, in the process of translation into digital mode, the kind of digitalisation in keeping with *his* view of the relationship" (1967: 100). Thus, the digitalisation of the community relationship was viewed, variously and simultaneously, as bribe and co-optation - an indication of Shell's commitment to Nigeria and the communities and as the necessary activities of a multinational oil company.

words" (Bateson, 1972).

In the extra-relationship and intra-relationship binds I have defined the internal management nexus of the Shell-Living Earth relationship as the parents making the paradoxical communication. In the extra-relationship bind the external parties are regarded as the victims, whilst in the intra-relationship bind it is the internal organisation within Shell and Living Earth that are seen as victims. The external and internal organisations, revealingly, suffer from similarly untenable positions as those that Shell suffers in its relationship with the community, in terms of Shell's understanding of the communities through "participation" and their ability to "help" them; my experience of Living Earth community development staff using the language of participation without conveying the credibility or sincerity is a stark example of this osmosis of paradoxical communication.

As noted above I interpreted Deirdre's refusal to talk to me as emanating from my association with Shell International - this communication pattern illuminates my own attempts at translation of analogic communication into digital understandings and leads us into a discussion of another anchoring bind.

10.6 Research-relationship bind

The implication of the intra- and extra-relationship binds is the perpetuation of untenable situations and confusion within Shell and Living Earth. It seems that once again there has been an attempt to look outwards for the resolution of such confusion - this time towards external consultants and researchers. In addition to commissioning my research, Shell and Living Earth also brought in two consultants to work on other aspects of the relationship. This activity resonates with the unresolved theme of providing "help" to the communities and Shell looking to NGOs for "help" in their society interface.

By seeking out researchers and consultants Living Earth and Shell were looking for outside help in meta-communicating about the nature of their relationship. The primary injunction in this bind from Shell and Living Earth to me, embodied in the discussion and formal agreement of my initial proposal and the first meeting, could be considered as "if you want to make a meta-comment on the nature of this relationship in a reflective, collaborative and change-oriented way then we are willing to do this with you". The secondary injunction was "if you want to make a meta-comment on the nature of this relationship in a reflective, collaborative and change-oriented way then we are *not* going to engage in this with you."

From the early stages of my involvement with the business-NGO agenda I have experienced some uncertainty over the nature and implications of such relationships. When the opportunity of working with Living Earth and Shell in Nigeria arose as a possibility, the excitement of getting on with my research and being involved with such a significant and well-known example was tinged with some misapprehension. From the early verbal communication from Living Earth and Shell I had framed their relationship as a genuine engagement that could be seen as a positive step towards sustainability; unambiguous benefits were being provided to communities in the Delta as action-oriented developments and Shell was actively looking to transform the way it thought about communities. This was backed up by various messages from organisational web sites and print media that suggested a desire on the part of Shell to listen, actively engage with society's expectations and undergo change towards becoming involved with sustainable development. I was told that both Shell and Living Earth had an active desire to learn from their engagement. I wrote the initial proposal for conducting a learning history with the sense that it would accord well with their desire for engaging in some kind of reflective practice. When Shell and Living Earth confirmed their interest in my proposal, I interpreted this as an acceptance of the reflective and change-oriented intents of the research and therefore, was able to dispel my personal concerns about what it "meant" to be working with Shell.

As I commenced my interviews, I picked up analogic messages from my interactions with individuals at Living Earth and Shell that conflicted with the digital commitment to engagement and reflection: the failure to arrange a time to meet with Michael to discuss Shell's expectations; the contrast between the amount of time that was being allowed for interviews at Shell International compared to Living Earth and other organisations; my perception of talking to the façade of a "Shell employee" rather than connecting with a person behind this role; the lack of reflectivity during Shell interviews compared to the depth of emotional engagement during my sessions at Living Earth UK; the inability to pre-plan the trip to Shell Nigeria or make contact with anyone over there about my research. All of these non-verbal messages that I received in my interactions with Shell conflicted with a perception of their commitment to engage with research that had come from their verbalised commitment at the outset.

At the same time as I was forming perceptions of the relationship between myself and Shell and Living Earth in terms of the research from all this analogic communication, I was also finding out about and reflecting upon the nature of the relationship between Shell and Living Earth in the context of the Delta. The initial analogic messages that I took from the appearance of Living Earth offices and the closeness of Roger and Michael, which lent subtle

tones of meaning to my understanding of the Shell-Living Earth relationship, were supplemented by subsequent verbal communication and further analogic messages that I received in conversation with participants. Much of this information - admittedly from more uncertain internal and critical external voices - added to a sense that messages coming from management of Shell International and Living Earth UK that affirmed the change-orientation of the relationship were, at best, insincere.

Additionally, whilst I had these concerns I also told myself that "if you are serious about change then perhaps you need to work the hard challenges. To run away from Nigeria or Shell is to suggest that they are beyond change" (personal notes 20 October 1999). I saw the importance of Shell being involved in some kind of change-related activity but it was not clear to me what form this change should take. One hears a note about the mutual exclusivity of messages about change and messages about the type of change that is similar to the note coming from the "extra-relationship" bind.

There is other resonance. In a way that is similar to the Martin Robert's verbalisation of his concern about the implications of Living Earth's relationship with Shell as quoted above, I noted my own "conflicting emotions", felt I was confronting "a real challenge working with Shell" and recalled that I had been weary of telling people that I was working "with" Shell. (Personal notes 21 September 1999). Additionally, as my concern with the ability to foster a reflective and change-oriented attitude to my research within Shell and Living Earth was augmented, I considered other more appropriate audiences for my inquiry. I had built up knowledge about the lack of control that ethnic minorities had over their own livelihoods, the environmental problems created by oil extraction activities and the role that oil companies and government had played in these issues. At the time I noted a general concern about the potential problems of "giving too much legitimacy to large multinationals through such engagement" and a perspective of "an international system increasingly dominated by large faceless, undemocratic corporations which survive upon inequalities" (Personal notes 6 Sept 1999). Increasingly, I sought to assess how the research could "help" the communities. In doing so, I veered towards the same kind of double-binding activity that was being played out elsewhere in the network. Once again, it is significant that I was a double-binder, as well as a double-bound, in a perpetuation of cycles of paradoxical communication.

My failure to fully comprehend the differentiation and significance of digital and analogic messages can in part be noticed in my tendency at the time to vacillate between blaming myself and blaming others for the various problems that I was experiencing. The attempts to deal with

these, indicated in my sense that I needed to "work the hard challenges" and desire to "help" the communities, hint at a tertiary injunction that I encountered and that I experienced as a prohibition from leaving the field. I made a range of inferences along the lines of such a prohibition: both Living Earth and Shell were expecting me to complete this research and write a case study, to which I had jointly contracted on behalf of INTRAC; the money I had used for my research expenses came from Shell; I would need to complete the research if I wanted to have any chance of successfully completing my PhD; and if I was genuinely serious about my desire for being part of a transition towards sustainability and influencing it I would need to be involved in and learn from practice.

Whilst I would not call myself a "victim" and the tertiary injunction was not so complete that I was *prohibited* from leaving the field, it is possible to show the binding nature of the communication and how this was manifested in attempts to develop a participatory mode of engagement. Simplified considerably, the various messages combined to suggest that (a) if I wanted to complete the research and usefully contribute to a sustainability agenda of participatory learning by all then I should persist with trying to build a participatory relationship with Shell and (b) it would be difficult if not impossible to develop the closeness of relationship with Shell that would be required if I wanted to conduct my research in a reflective and collaborative way that could contribute to such a sustainability agenda.

My uncertainty with regard to the meaning of the Shell-Living Earth relationship was enhanced by these conflicting messages. In conversation with staff at Shell and Living Earth I could not *not* respond to these concerns. Watzlawick and colleagues (1967) would likely contend that, with uncertainty about the meaning of the relationship, my biases would have been reflected as I translated from analogue understandings about the relationship into digital verbalisations of the case write-up. And there are examples of this: I interpreted both the analogic and digital messaging from Roger and Shell with increasing guardedness towards sincerity about change. These feelings were perhaps conveyed most forcefully in my own analogic communication with Shell and Living Earth; while I thought that I had conducted my interactions with them in an unassuming manner, reflecting upon this now it is most probable that I was sending messages through my tone, posture and other kinesics that reflected my concerns. My inability to voice the nature of these concerns in the midst of these interactions and the inappropriateness of doing so would have fed into another set of double-binds, as my interviewees became subject to aspects of paradoxical communication emanating from me.

Thus, I would in no way suggest that I responded to the situation by "taking hold of the stick" in the moment, as the enlightened Zen pupil was able to in one of Bateson's original examples. Nevertheless, I did make attempts to break out of the bind by reflecting upon the circumstances and attempting strategies to reframe the research and create the participatory engagement with various individuals at Shell. And this present framing of my relationships, in terms of meta-communication and a network of double-binds, helps to make a sense of a number of other experiences during these interactions. For example, my concern with the publication of the INTRAC case-study can be seen in the light of a tacit awareness of the difficulty in *not* conveying the nature of my apprehension about the relationship (through the analogic communication of writing style and tone) in a way that would harm my subsequent interaction with Living Earth and Shell over the learning histories. But the result of much of this at the time was a less than satisfactory relationship with Shell and Roger, in which, on occasion, I acted defensively and offensively to protect myself. All the while I underwent considerable uncertainty and vacillated between extreme apprehension and excitement, never being sure where to locate myself, Shell and Living Earth or the relationship.

These are some of the difficulties that emerge from a whole network of double-binding communication. To the extent that I have been able to make these meta-comments about the my relationship to Living Earth and Shell this suggests that I have been able to break out of the tangle of double-binds.

Whilst I have been able to make this series of comments upon the behavioural pragmatics involving the relationships between myself, Shell and Living Earth, these have been made outside of the context of on-going interaction. In this sense, I have been able to take a step out of the tangles and suggest ways of making sense of the situation. However, my doing so is an expression of power, for my ability is augmented by the relative safety that comes from engaging in such exploration for professional/research purposes. There is a sense in which, by abstracting myself from the situation, I have both been able to make these comments and also remain shielded from having to consider the nature of analogic communication that I would be sending via this present writing. I might consider that during my relationships with the organisations I always had the opportunity to remove myself from the communicative binds by making meta-comments such as these. In fact, on a number of occasions I sought to make such meta-comments and these might be read as evidence that I had escaped the condition of schizophrenia. However, the essence of Batesonian double-bind theory is to suggest that tangles, schizophrenia and untenable positions are in the relationship, in the pattern of communication between individuals and not in the individuals minds. Therefore, it is only in

the sense that I have escaped the relationship that I am no longer bound to communicate in the specific schizophreneze of that culture; because of the relational nature of this perspective on schizophrenia even the positing of meta-comments during the relationship were to some extent bound up within the tangled communicative context.

Previously, in the midst of relating, the importance of any communication about relationship was highly significant in continuously defining the ground for possibilities of interaction. Now, in the cold light of detachment, I am less dependent upon the nature of my communication with the parties.   Meanwhile for Shell and Living Earth, being essentially bound to their double-binding context seems to have perpetuated various untenable positions for the organisations, individuals within them and the communities with whom they are interacting. I shall return to some of these perspectives on the pragmatics of communication and the double-bind in chapter 12. In the next chapter I take a slightly different view of communication that allows us to consider these relational praxes from a different angle.

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