

## From System to Skill: Palo Alto Group's Contested Legacy of Communication

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In the past few decades, the notion of “communication skills” has become increasingly dominant in cultural discourse, as such skills are deemed crucial for success in seemingly various professional occupations and in diverse aspects of an individual’s life. This study traces the development of the notion of communication as skills that emerged from the theoretical and experimental work of the Palo Alto group in the 1950s and 1960s. It analyzes the shift from the cybernetic, system-oriented, and technology-inspired conceptualization of communication by the group to the current widespread perception of communication as a self-centered, emotions-directed, reflexive and conscious set of skills. The study argues that, more than a misrepresentation of the group’s ideas, this shift reflects a tension already embedded in the work of the Palo Alto group between theorizing and practicing communication.

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Since the second half of the 20th century, “communication” has become a prevailing cultural term. Typically referring to interpersonal face-to-face interactions (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981), “communication” has permeated diverse domains from the home to the workplace—so much so, that contemporary Western society has been characterized as a “communication culture” (Cameron, 2000). Scholars have identified various economic, sociological, and cultural causes behind this cultural trend, among them, the weakening of traditional ties to family, community, and religion (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Giddens, 1991, 1992); the internalization of democratic and feminist values within romantic relationships (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2007); the increased penetration of psychology into corporate and popular culture (Illouz, 2007, 2008); and the late-modern capitalist shift from locally based production of goods to a global system of services (Cameron, 2000).

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Although it is often presented as a casualty of the corrupting effects of modernity, and particularly of mass media, the very notion of “interpersonal communication” is rooted in modernity. According to Peters (1999), “communication as a person-to-person activity became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated communication. Mass communication came first” (p. 6). Moreover, the very means used to revive the ostensibly lost authenticity of “communication”—for example, communication skills-training programs for employees and couples workshops—express a deep internalization of core values of modern capitalism such as individualism, collaboration, and effective interaction (Cameron, 2000; Illouz, 2007, 2008). Under such conceptualizations, communication is typically regarded as “skills,” defined, for instance, by Hargie (1986) as “a set of goal-directed, inter-related situationally appropriated social behaviors which can be learned and which are under the control of the individual” (p. 12).

Most scholarly and popular texts about communication skills focus on what these skills include, how they work, and, above all, how they can be improved. Communication skills are typically considered to be the key to success and well-being in various aspects of life: professional, social, romantic, psychological, emotional, and even physical (Spitzberg, 2003). Illustration of the perceived importance of communication skills can be found, for example, in a skills-training website claiming that “being able to communicate effectively is perhaps the most important of all life skills” (SkillsYouNeed, 2021, para. 1). An introduction to a scholarly textbook similarly assumes that “readers of this book almost certainly agree that many of the most important activities in which we engage are communicative” (Wiemann, 2003, p. ix). Communication skills consistently rank among the highest in the list of skills and qualities employers seek in candidates (Knight, 2020) and are regarded as relevant in seemingly all occupations.

The cultural preoccupation with communication skills has attracted the attention of critics who point to the entwinement of the concept of “skill” with the workings of power and knowledge in evolving forms of labor, industry, and education (Bartha, 2009; Holborow, 2018). Thus, for example, Cameron (2000) claims that the real goal of mandatory training programs in communication skills is promoting higher conformity with corporate norms. Analyzing institutions such as call centers, she shows how these “communication factories,” while stressing the importance of “interpersonal communication skills,” actually follow a production-line logic meant to maximize efficiency: The aim is to keep the call short by delivering just enough information to keep customers satisfied. Employees repetitively perform the same task and are expected to follow preset conversation protocols even in emotionally fraught situations involving dissatisfied or angry customers. In the same vein, Urciuoli (2008) argues that “skills discourses” express a neoliberal commodification (or fetishization) of the self, which is recast as a “bundle of skills.”

Following these critical stances, this study expands the examination of the notion of “communication skills” to include not only the social but also the historical and theoretical perspectives. The underpinnings of this notion can be traced to several sources across the fields of therapy, education, and training that operated in the 1960s in North America and promoted personal growth and development of interpersonal skills. Salient among them are the Human Potential Movement and training groups known as “T-groups” or “sensitivity training” (Highhouse, 2002) that were inspired by figures such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. All of these integrated the concept of “communication”—along with various derivative and associated notions (e.g., “active listening”)—in their broader, person-centered endeavor of popularizing psychology to increase self-actualization. The concomitant effect of this trend is what Illouz (2008) describes

as today's wide-sweeping "therapy as emotional style," namely the cultural preoccupation with certain emotions and the utilization of specific techniques to identify and understand them (p. 12).

Concurrently, and operating in similar areas of intellectual pursuit, another group of influential scholars became highly involved in theorizing, experimenting with, and teaching communication, and they, too, continue to significantly influence today's communication culture. Unlike their peers, however, these scholars—who became known as the Palo Alto group—approached the issue of communication in a markedly different way. Led by the eminent anthropologist Gregory Bateson, their perspective was theoretical and system oriented. The group's specifically mechanistic orientation of the study of communication and the unexplored link between it and current notions of communications skills are the focus of this study. An analysis of the group's theorization of communication during two decades of writings, from 1952 to 1972, highlights the differences between its cybernetic, system-oriented, and technology-inspired conceptualization of communication and the current perception of communication as a self-centered, emotions-directed, reflexive, and conscious set of skills. This finding is of note since many in today's business of communication skills refer to the work of the Palo Alto group for theoretical corroboration. The shift toward the practical and the self-centric, however, is not entirely because of recent misunderstanding or misrepresenting, but is, in fact, already evident in the work of the group members themselves. That their own conception of communication was fraught with internal tension might reflect more broadly the inherent inconsistencies in the theorization of communication and attempt at its practical implementation.

### **Communication: The Interactional View**

In 1952, Gregory Bateson received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for a research project on the paradoxes of abstraction in communication (unless otherwise specified, subsequent biographical information from Lipset, 1980). At the time, Bateson was still in the midst of a personal and professional crisis. Three years earlier, he had been denied the renewal of a visiting professorship at the department of anthropology at Harvard; the following year, he was divorced by his first wife, Margaret Mead. Bateson turned to psychotherapy, which he found pleasant and informative—perhaps because he was familiar with therapy through his collaborative work with psychiatrist Jurgen Ruesch. The latter had hired Bateson in 1948 to serve as a medical anthropologist studying communication patterns among "a tribe called psychiatrists" (Ruesch, as cited in Lipset, 1980, p. 187). Ruesch and Bateson (1951) published *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*, which summarized their joint work and that contains many of the ideas that Bateson would elaborate in his future research in varied fields.

By the time Bateson received the grant, his interest in communication spanned two decades of research in several disciplines. At this point, he was working in the area of cybernetics and the application of Bertrand Russell's (1903) *Logical Types* to communication. After receiving the grant, Bateson recruited four colleagues and former students: William F. Fry, Jay Haley, John Weakland, and Donald (Don) Jackson. The Palo Alto group, as they were to become known, would drastically change the shape of psychology as well as popular conceptions of familial and interpersonal communication. In their first years, however, group members were not particularly interested in examining interpersonal communication and did not even focus on human communication, preferring instead to study the training of guide dogs for the blind, animals' play, ventriloquism, humor, and

hypnosis. Grappling with the objective of their collaborative work, group members doubted whether the paradoxes of abstraction they were studying had any relevance to human life.

After two years had elapsed without any publications on the part of group members, their request for a grant renewal was denied. Desperately, Bateson approached the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation with a hastily put together proposal, and obtained, in 1954, a two-year grant to study schizophrenia. Thus began the group's fruitful era, starting with the famous theory of the "double bind" (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956), referring to a situation in which one is entrapped in an environment wherein one is repeatedly exposed to contradicting messages—for instance, a mother telling her son she loves him while stiffly hugging him—to the degree of developing a psychopathology.

The original study focused on schizophrenia but mentioned several other examples of multilayeredness in communication (e.g., play or metaphor). In the coming years, the double bind evolved from a theory about schizophrenia to an "epistemology" or "language" (Bateson, 1966) explaining several psychological phenomena, including hysteria, phobias, and obsessive compulsiveness (Sluzki & Verón, 1971), as well as humor, creativity, poetry, fiction, delinquency, hypnosis, religion, art, and therapy (see Abeles, 1976, p. 113). Indeed, upon further inquiries, group members ultimately reached the conclusion that *all* communication is multilayered. Group members applied to these cases the concept of "metacommunication," originally introduced by Ruesch and Bateson (1951), denoting the context-marker according to which messages should be understood. For example, dogs playing war conveyed a threatening message alongside a reassuring metamessage that what they were engaged in was just a game. Group members believed that metamessaging (i.e., stepping out of a situation and pointing out its inner contradictions and paralyzing effects) was also the way out of a double bind.

In 1958, seeking to expand the new field of family therapy, Jackson teamed up with Jules Riskin and Virginia Satir to establish the Mental Research Institute (MRI). All of Bateson's group members, apart from Bateson himself, began working simultaneously at Bateson's Project—as the original group was then referred to—and at the Mental Research Institute, together with several other researchers, including Paul Watzlawick, R. D. Laing, and Janet Beavin Bavelas. Group members conducted theoretical and experimental research, some of it in collaboration with other well-known scholars. They wrote extensively: By the end of the 1970s, they had published more than 20 books and several hundred articles (Wilder, 1979). In addition, group members taught and trained therapists in the fields of family communication, ran communication workshops, and treated patients in private clinics.

Across their various occupations, group members shared a common interest in the different levels of communication—particularly those holding emotional importance—viewing communication as a broad, holistic, and dynamic phenomenon (Haley, 1976). Adopting a cybernetic view, they regarded communication as any information-based system in which content flows in certain patterns, with a circular, feedback nature (Haley, 1971; Watzlawick, 1976). Consequently, they regarded communication as synonymous with "relationship" or with "what is often loosely gathered under the rubric 'interaction'" (Watzlawick & Beavin, 1967, p. 4) and, in fact, identical to any human behavior (including avoidance of behavior; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Consequently, they applied the term "communication" to any situation involving the copresence of two or more people, regardless of their intentions, consciousness, or actions.

What interested these scholars was not individuals' interactions with one another but the system of communication as a whole—a system they regarded as larger than the sum of its parts (Jackson, 1965; Riskin & Faunce, 1970). Group members posited that, as a self-correcting system, communication is always in flux—that is, in seeking homeostasis, it could achieve that state only by means of constant self-adjustment (Jackson, 1965). Accordingly, they viewed dysfunctional families as those characterized not by instability but rather by rigidity (Haley, 1967). This view led to the establishment of the field of family treatment, which dealt with the family as a whole, as opposed to "separate sessions whether by the same therapist or even by different therapists who may or may not communicate among themselves about their individual efforts" (Watzlawick, 1976, p. xi). The primary importance of this new form of therapy was embedded in its theoretical innovativeness rather than in its practicality. As Watzlawick (1976) stated, "family therapy, as it has evolved during the last twenty years, is in our opinion not simply a new, additional treatment *method*, but first of all a *new way of conceptualizing human problems*" (p. xii; emphasis in original).

Breaking off from traditional psychology, the Palo Alto group's therapy focused on interactional rules rather than on personal roles. They aimed to undo problematic patterns in the relationship rather than attempting to remedy individuals' problematic personality traits (Bateson, 1972; Jackson, 1965; Watzlawick, 1976). In a series of experiments (reviewed in Riskin, 1964), group members tape-recorded and transcribed familial conversations and then applied to them dichotomous scores on various scales. A debate over planning a family trip, for instance, was scored on the basis of how much agreement/disagreement was expressed and on the number and configurations of "coalitions" the family formed. Other members of the research team, who were exposed neither to the conversations nor to the transcripts, used only the scores to correlate disturbed communication patterns with family malfunctions, yielding results that were said to be more accurate than those given by a clinician who analyzed the original recordings.

Many other studies of the group relied on the then novel methodology of using technology, including tape recorders, one-way glass, film, switchboards, and telephones (e.g., Haley, 1962; see also Ray & Brasher, 2010). Group members were also among the first to use devices such as video cameras and tape recorders in therapy (Ray & Brasher, 2010). In experimentation and in treatment, technology was used for two main purposes: to document the multitude of nuances of interactions and as a substitute for the researchers' own presence in the clinic. The familial system was thus hooked up to mechanical communication networks not only conceptually but also in practice (sometimes literally—as in experiments in which microphones were attached to family members' throats and activated by the vibration of their vocal cords; Haley, 1964). The result was a "cybernetic family" modeled on analogies to media and technology, and "itself a functioning media technology composed of film strips, feedback loops, photographs, studios, audio recordings, mirrors, mothers, fathers, children, and therapists" (Geoghegan, 2017, p. 72). Group members were affected, too, as "communication technology began to be part of the language of this field" (Haley, 1971, p. 5; See also Weakland, Watzlawick, & Riskin, 1995).

In fact, developing a language to describe communication was one of the goals and main challenges of the group (Weakland, 1974). Time and again, group members expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of adequate terms to describe their ideas, about existing terminology as being biased toward theories of the individual (e.g., Haley, 1976; Jackson, 1965). Trying to create their own language, group members encountered further difficulties. "The basic problem our work faced goes even beyond the obstinate fact that

our subject as well as our tool for handling it involved words," recollected Weakland (1976, p. 108). "The root of the matter is that, for all its variety and flexibility, language is only part of communication and behavior" (Weakland, 1976, p. 108). Despite their preoccupation with communication—or perhaps precisely because of it—they had difficulty finding the words to describe the very thing they were doing.

Ultimately, a language was formulated. Its basic tenets were formalized as "axioms" in the influential *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick et al., 1967). *Pragmatics*, whose title may be misleading—the book is actually about the theory of the "pragmatics" (i.e., behavioral effects) of human communication—introduced the famous dictum "you cannot not communicate." It also listed a series of distinctions: between "digital" (linguistic) and "analogic" (nonlinguistic) communication; between the "report" (or "content") and the "command" (or "relationship") aspects of the interaction; and between symmetrical and complementary relationships. Finally, the book discusses the axiom of "punctuation," connoting the means of interpretation given to specific exchanges or to the general pattern of interactions (e.g., whether one spouse is nagging because the other is unresponsive, or vice versa). In sum, these axioms epitomize the group's worldview: everything is communication, communication itself is multilayered, and the meaning of communication derives from the angle at which it is perceived and discussed.

In 1962, Bateson's group's grant money terminated, and Bateson moved to the Virgin Islands and Hawaii to study dolphin communication. By the mid- to late 1960s, the Palo Alto group had dissolved, but its members continued developing and disseminating their ideas in other research institutes that they joined or established. By then, group members had become some of the most influential and outstanding figures of their time. Bateson, for example, has been praised as "one of the most original social scientists of [the 20th] century" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. i), and as one who "may yet be recognized as the single most important thinker of the twentieth century" (as cited in Charlton, 2008, p. 11). Jackson was voted one of the 10 most influential American psychiatrists of the 1960s (Rogow, 1970), and Virginia Satir is said to be considered one of the most effective therapists of the 20th century (Andreas, 1991), and the most visible and influential popularizer of family and couple's therapy, among both professional and lay audiences, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). As a collective, the group has been labeled one of the most influential groups in the field of psychotherapy since Freud's inner circle (Trepper, 1995, p. xvii); it was regarded at the time as a social movement (even religion) rather than merely a collective of scholars (Wilder, 1979).

Indeed, to this day, the group continues to exert a significant, albeit often unacknowledged, influence on the theory and practice of communication in various academic and popular fields. In the field of psychology, it has been argued that

conceptual and intervention strategies and procedures pioneered . . . [by group members] have been adopted by most other models of practice and training—so extensively used that who it was that introduced them has become obscured with the passage of time. (Ray & Brasher, 2010, p. 18)

The Mental Research Institute was the first to offer training in family therapy, and its members, particularly Jackson, Haley, and Satir, shaped the field in its first three decades (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002)

and still hold considerable influence on family and systemic therapies (see reviews in Lebow & Diamond, 2019). Researchers at the Mental Research Institute also developed brief therapy—a still commonly used technique from which most systematic models of therapy have derived or have been greatly influenced, including today's most popular therapeutic technique, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT; see Geoghegan, 2017; Ray & Brasher, 2010).

In the academic fields of sociology and communication studies, the Palo Alto group has influenced researchers of interpersonal communication and interaction (e.g., Goffman, 1974), and disciplines such as conversation analysis (Beach, 2013; Tseliou, 2013). In addition, key terms and conceptualizations from the group, such as "framing" and "metacommunication," continue to crop up as analytic tools and are themselves the subject of numerous studies of news analysis, political rhetoric, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and ethnography of communication (Craig, 2016; Rogers, 1994). Ideas from the group have also sparked quasi-academic and popular programs and practices, including couple communication (Miller & Sherrard, 1999), neuro-linguistic programming (NLP; Bandler & Grinder, 1975), and practical application of intimate relationship skills (PAIRS; Gordon & Durana, 1999). The group has also inspired various social critics and theorists and has fueled social movements such as the antipsychiatry movement and programs for the deinstitutionalization of mental patients (Geoghegan, 2017).

Finally, the Palo Alto group significantly influenced the popular conceptualization of communication. Its ideas trickled down from academia and from the new types of therapy and were disseminated in bestsellers authored by group members (e.g., Satir, 1972, 1988; Watzlawick et al., 1967), coauthored with them (Bandler, Grinder, & Satir, 1976), by scholars explicitly influenced by them (e.g., Tannen, 1987), and by authors making uncredited use of the group's terms (e.g., "framing") and notions (e.g., the distinction between verbal and nonverbal communication). Overall, as Craig (2016) notes in his overview of the concept "metacommunication," our contemporary communication culture, bearing an all-encompassing view of communication and saturated with metadiscourse and reflexivity, may be seen as derived from, and described by, the Palo Alto group's efforts to establish communication about communication.

A current example of the application of this concept (as well as of the notion of communication as skills more generally) can be found in an article titled "What Is Meta-communication? Can It Benefit Virtual and International Teams?" that was recently posted on a website offering international communication training workshops. In the article, "metacommunication" is presented as a means for solving technical, cultural, and interpersonal communication problems (e.g., static on the line, differences in politeness norms, or communication styles) among virtual and international teams. "By discussing their communication process and creating custom communication rules," concludes the article, "teams develop their team culture and communication style" (VanLandingham, 2020, n.p.).

Scholars who have studied the Palo Alto group commonly underscore its enduring influence while noting the lack of sufficient acknowledgment it receives. Seemingly, the group shares the ironic fate of many seminal figures who were forgotten once their groundbreaking ideas became common knowledge, and whose ideas were later distorted. The group's system-oriented, nonhuman, and technology-inspired "communication" begot a self-centered, emotions-directed, reflexive, and conscious offspring often prefixed by "interpersonal" and suffixed by "skill"—two additions that, with the exception of a book coauthored by

Satir (Bandler et al., 1976), never appear in all of the Palo Alto group's extensive writing on communication. Neither could they have appeared. From the group's perspective, "interpersonal communication" is both redundant (every communication is "inter") and antithetical (communication is never "personal"), and the discreteness and linearity implied by "skills" contradict the holistic and circular nature of communication.

Indeed, the novelty of the group's conceptualization and the ambiguity of the terms they used may have led to the simplification—to the extent of alteration—of their ideas. As Wilder-Mott (1981) claims, "the misinterpretation suggested by several of these terms could fill its own book" (p. 19; see also Rogers, 1994). Even if so, it is only fitting that such misinterpretations be analyzed in a manner reflecting the true perspective of the Palo Alto group—namely, as modifications rather than as misinterpretations, with each of these modifications analyzed in accordance with the context in which it occurred (what group members termed "ecology"), and the inner potential that permitted its appearance ("evolution"). Such analysis will not only shed light on changes in the concept of "communication" from the time of the Palo Alto group to the present day but also explicate the broader theoretical and cultural dimensions of the concept.

### **Communication: From System to Skill**

In the beginning was the split. Years before introducing logical types to communication theory and to the inner chasms of the schizophrenic, Bateson (1936) coined the term "schismogenesis," which he defined as "a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals" (p. 175). He rarely used the term in his future writing, but the twin themes—differentiation and relation—and the dynamics between them, threaded his thought throughout his life. He also instilled this worldview in the rest of the Palo Alto group. Relationships, not "things," inhabited their ecology. "We live in a world that is only made of relationships," Bateson stated (Bateson & Sieburg, 2010, 0:13:31). Jackson echoed this belief, calling for a shift in thought and in terminology "from description of the 'nature of' someone to descriptions of the 'relationships between' someone and someone else" (as cited in Wilder-Mott, 1981, p. 25).

If relation is the most basic "thing," difference is the most basic thought. As Bateson (1972) stated: "the word 'idea,' in its most basic elementary sense, is synonymous with 'difference.' . . . what I mean by information—the elementary unit of information—is a *difference which makes a difference*" (p. 459; emphasis in original). Discerning this difference requires both being in relation to, and distinct from, the observed object or phenomenon (see Bateson, 1960). What represents best the separation–relation dialectic is communication: a means of connecting that nevertheless emphasizes separation, or, in the group's cybernetic terms, a system of information (i.e., a "difference that makes a difference") synonymous with "relationship."

Capturing a perfect reification of the separation–relation dyad, members of the Palo Alto group insisted on not dissecting communication into its schematic parts (i.e., sender, receiver, etc.). However, treating communication holistically merely shifted differentiation elsewhere—inward (the distinction between different logical types and between messages and meta-messages) or outward (the distinction between different types of relationships more broadly). More importantly, group members did not fully take into account their own stance about communication, largely overlooking the difference—but also the connection—between *theorizing* communication and *practicing* it. Group members initially dedicated themselves to developing a general theory



of communication, but as they (and those influenced by them) gradually began applying their ideas, their focus inevitably shifted from the whole to the parts, from the system to the individual.

For some group members, the transformation from theory to practice—that is, from thinking about communication abstractly to harnessing it as a practical tool—occurred over time, while for others, the inclination toward one of the poles versus the other was more fixed. Bateson clearly represents the theoretical pole: “There is a fundamental difference between my position and that of Lidz, Wynn and even Haley and Jackson,” he said (as cited in Lipset, 1980, p. 237). “They are clinicians. I am a theorist. . . . I am only looking for examples of formal relations, which will illustrate a theory” (as cited in Lipset, 1980, p. 237). Indeed, most theoretical papers published by the group were Bateson’s (see Lipset, 1980, p. 236). In 1960, while his colleagues were busy establishing training centers and treating patients, Bateson returned to spending hours observing animals—this time octopi (which at some point he raised in the living room of the home he shared with his newlywed third wife, Lois). “Octopus was deliberately chosen as being both complex and maximally different from the human species,” Bateson explained (as cited in Lipset, 1980, p. 233). “If some general proposition be true both of man and octopus, then this proposition at least stands a chance of being universally true” (as cited in Lipset, 1980, p. 233).

Other group members, especially at this stage, cared less about exposing a universal truth about communication, and more about utilizing what they had already discovered. Of them, Satir cared the least about theory. From the start, she rejected the cybernetic, system-center inclination of the group. As Gurman and Fraenkel (2002) point out: “Satir always kept in view what M. P. Nichols (1987) later called the ‘self in the system’” (p. 214). Satir’s humanistic approach (and perhaps also her gender—she was the only woman to hold a directorial position at the Mental Research Institute) led critics to view her as “touchy-feely” (Yung Tsang, 2011, p. 64). Although the “mother of family therapy,” as she became known, gained popularity, admiration, and love among the wider public, she was dismissed by some among her own colleagues as a “fuzzy and naïve thinker” (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p. 122). Even those crediting her intuition noted that she was “absolutely incapable of following a syllogism through to its logical conclusion” (Weakland et al., 1995, p. 10).

Satir left the Mental Research Institute in 1964 to pursue a successful independent career, increasing her publications tenfold, from a mere six during her 12-year stay at the Mental Research Institute, to more than 60 in the following 12 years. Besides her publications—some of which remain bestsellers to this day—Satir established several centers, delivered numerous lectures, convened workshops, and trained a multitude of disciples around the world. Nowadays, she is probably the most well-known of the Palo Alto group. In 1977, she was joined in the Esalen Institute by Bateson, with whom she collaborated for the last three years of his life. Together, they inspired and tutored Richard Bandler and John Grinder, who developed neuro-linguistic programming (NLP; Spitzer, 1992). The technique, defined broadly by its developers as “the study of subjective experience” (Dilts, Grinder, Bandler, & DeLozier, 1980), became one of the world’s most popular forms of interpersonal skills and communication training (Passmore & Rowson, 2019; Tosey & Mathison, 2003).

NLP is an eclectic method (or, as its developers preferred to call it, “model”) said to be founded on various disciplines, primarily Ericsonian hypnosis, Chomskyan linguistics and, above all, Bateson’s cybernetics (Tosey & Mathison, 2003). It is based on the idea that people hold various representations of

the world, and that they process most information in accordance with one of five “preferred representational systems” (PRS) corresponding to the five senses: visual, kinesthetic, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory. According to NLP, one’s PRS can be ascertained through “accessing cues,” in particular, a person’s style of speaking (for instance, which verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are preferred) or certain eye movements (for instance, people who are looking up and to the left are likely to be recollecting visual memories; Heap, 1988; Witkowsky, 2012). Furthermore, experienced practitioners can “match, mirror,” and “pace”—that is, replicate aspects of their interlocutor’s speech, gestures, body posture, breathing, and blinking—effectively tuning into the latter’s PRS. This, in turn, facilitates communication, trust, and enhanced rapport (Heap, 1988). For instance, an NLP practitioner who identifies that his interlocutor is a visual type will use metaphors such as “I see your point” (Passmore & Rowson, 2019; Witkowsky, 2012).

Bandler and Grinder developed NLP based on the assumption that outstanding psychotherapists have treatment patterns that can be revealed and “modeled” (Passmore & Rowson, 2019). In fact, NLP was conceived after Bandler (a university student at the time) was hired to record and transcribe both a month-long workshop that Satir conducted in Canada and teaching films featuring the psychiatrist Fritz Perls. Bandler spent several months listening meticulously to the recordings, eventually adopting many of the two’s voice patterns and mannerisms (Spitzer, 1992). Perls and Satir (to whom Bandler and Grinders’ [1975] first book, *The Structure of Magic*, was dedicated, and who wrote its preface), along with hypnotist Milton Ericson (who was introduced to Grinder and Bandler by Bateson), were the experts whose communication patterns were chosen to be modeled.

Of all the alleged theoretical forefathers of NLP, Bateson was the only one who actively helped forge it and who warmly endorsed it. “John Grinder and Richard Bandler have done something similar to what my colleagues and I attempted fifteen years ago,” he wrote in the opening to his introduction to *The Structure of Magic* (Bateson, 1975, p. viii). “They have tools which we did not have—or did not see how to use” (Bateson, 1975, p. viii). He then went on to explain what these tools are: “They have succeeded in making linguistics into a base for theory and simultaneously into a tool for therapy . . . [they] have succeeded in making explicit the syntax of how people avoid change and, therefore, how to assist them in changing” (Bateson, 1975, p. x).

It would be expected that, of NLP’s three components, Bateson would be more drawn to the physiological system of neurons or to the mechanical operation of programming than to the human language. Admittedly, from the perspective of linguistics, language is indeed cybernetic: a closed recursive system that derives its meaning from relationships and differentiations among its components. However, Bateson, who had studied and taught linguistics, could not have been overly impressed by Bandler and Grinder’s conceptual insights in this field, since, despite the latter’s abundant use of scientific jargon, they openly expressed their contempt for scientific theorization and experimental validation. “We have *no* idea about the ‘real’ nature of things, and we’re not particularly interested in what’s ‘true.’ The function of modeling is to arrive at descriptions which are useful,” they wrote (Bandler & Grinder, 1979, p. 7). Rather, what captivated Bateson in NLP was the thing he tended to avoid—*utilization* of theory. After decades of pondering the complications of logical abstractions and studying monkeys, otters, octopi, dolphins, and dogs in search for a “universally true” communication, Bateson discovered language’s other aspects: its humanness and its practicality.

### **The Communication Knot: The Self as a System**

As much as Palo Alto group members may have compromised scientific standards of methodological validation (see Weakland, 1981; Wilder, 1979), they nevertheless exhibited the curiosity and imagination of natural scientists. Their cybernetic model of communication was inspired by technology and by the natural world, while largely ignoring social aspects. Group members "de-individualized" communication not because they themselves lacked personality or denigrated people, but because they were interested in the phenomenon of communication for what it was.

However, as group members may have been the first to admit, communication theory and its practice are inseparable. In fact, as Krippendorff (1994) observes, they are recursively intertwined. On the one hand, every manifestation of communication mandates, and hence refers to, a preexisting, taken-for-granted context of its occurring. On the other hand, theories of communication are not only *about* communication but are also themselves a form of communication. Furthermore, since communication is a social construct, notions about what communication is, what it should be, and how it should be carried out emerge from and reenter the same social fabric from which they emerge.

Indeed, group members became personally involved in metacommunication: by lecturing, teaching, and treating, they communicated their ideas about communication. However, as their attention shifted from the theoretical to the practical, their neutral attribution of systems and machines to communication began invoking new senses of utility, productivity, uniformity, corporate mindset, and efficacy, consequently entailing new psychological and social outcomes. The type of advice and counseling they offered reflected views and practices stemming from influential approaches such as Rogerian psychology, which until then had been antithetical to Bateson's ideas (see, e.g., Cissna & Anderson, 2005).

Eventually, group members' ideas merged into the neoliberal system of beliefs. The cultural detachment with which they initially viewed communication may have contributed to its integration into the current view of it as a discrete, quantifiable, and rankable set of "skills." These skills began functioning as what Foucault (1988) termed "technologies of the self": a set of day-to-day practices affecting one's thoughts and actions, guiding one's self-perception and perception by others, and establishing one's self within, and vis-à-vis, social power structures.

As such, communication skills came to be regarded as playing a key role in the never-ending "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991) aimed at improving the individual's personality and relational conduct. They were also identified as a crucial element in negotiating and reflecting upon romantic relationships in "pure relationships" (Giddens, 1992), whereby

relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. (p. 58)

Indeed, the notion of "communication," which assumed the characteristics of therapeutic discourse (e.g., openness, sincerity, empathy, honesty, sharing, and "active listening") was subsequently seen as the

core of the romantic relationship. As Bellah and colleagues (1985) observed: "In a world of independent individuals who have no necessary obligations to one another, and whose needs may or may not mesh, the central virtue of love—indeed the virtue that sometimes replaces the ideal of love—is communication" (p. 101). Although the Palo Alto group members, too, equated relation with communication (while ignoring love), their equation held an opposite "punctuation" (in the sense offered by Watzlawick et al., 1967). To them, a relationship was a given (albeit dynamic) system in which the two sides, willingly or not, are in communication, rather than an ad hoc precarious arrangement whose existence depends on the continuous activation of communication.

The Palo Alto group's dictum "*you cannot not communicate*" was thus transformed from a theoretical observation to a social imperative: "*you must communicate.*" As such, it entailed sanctions against those who did not comply. "There is a kind of righteous tyranny about 'communication' that I find troubling," writes Peters (1999). "The term can be used to browbeat others for 'failing to communicate' when they are opting out of the game" (Peters, 1999, p. 267). Indeed, opting out of the game is not a possibility, as Katriel and Philipsen (1981) observed in their analysis of what they termed the "communication ritual"—the act in which couples initiate an emotional and reflective discussion about problems in their relationship. Refusal to take part in the ritual, note Katriel and Philipsen (1981), can become a tangled issue, since "unlike any other disagreement this one cannot be remedied through 'communication'—an attempt to do so would be a *de facto* enactment of the 'communication' ritual" (p. 312). Ironically, metacommunication itself became the knot, rather than the means for untangling it.

Moreover, the social imperative to communicate begins even before encountering the other—with one's very relationship with oneself. As Askehave (2004) notes, in self-help books, "the meaning of 'listening' has been expanded to cover a spiritual meaning (i.e., it becomes a therapeutic/spiritual process which involves listening to your inner self"; p. 15). In such books, and in today's metadiscourse more generally, there is a strong interdependence between intrapersonal communication—concerning one's self-consciousness vis-à-vis one's emotions and needs—and interpersonal communication that expresses and recognizes both one's own and the other's emotions and needs.

More than merely a psychological acknowledgment of the hidden motivations within the self, one's obligation to communicate with oneself takes on the form of management of a system. As Gershon (2011, following Urciuoli, 2008) describes it, the neoliberal individual has become "a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business" (p. 537). This self is molded by the combination of psychology and corporate logic defined by Illouz (2007) as "emotional capitalism," and is fueled by a multibillion personal-training industry that includes self-help books, TV talk-shows, growth workshops, and personal counseling. In the corporate world, communication has become central as it reconciles between two opposing social norms: the increasing democratization of relationships, and the increasingly hierarchical structure of the corporate world (Illouz, 2008). Similarly, in romantic relationships, communication is accorded crucial importance, since it serves to mediate between the opposing desires for connection, on the one hand, and independence and self-fulfillment, on the other (Giddens, 1992).

Accordingly, the ideal of communication promoted in the communication culture is paradoxical: a skill that can and should be improved by practicing is regarded, at the same time, as a rare and spontaneous

disclosure of an authentic self. Communication, which for the Palo Alto group members was a given (albeit often flawed) reality, has come to be seen as a volatile construct whose existence is contingent upon ongoing scrutiny and maintenance. Arguably, communication's precariousness corresponds to the instability of the modern self that has been detached from traditional social systems, above all, the nuclear family. It is in this sense that the roots of the corporatized self's investment in communication may be found in the way the Palo Alto group members viewed the family. As Geoghegan (2017) suggests, in postwar America, when the nuclear family was one of the most holy social institutions, celebrated as an emblem of national and moral rectitude, the Palo Alto group regarded family as a "kind of post-Fordist factory for the production and management of psychic well-being" (p. 71).

Half a century after the Palo Alto group's heyday, its theory about schizophrenia ceased to be considered a valid explanation for the mental illness. However, it has since been applied, first by psychiatrist R. D. Laing and later by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, to describe the conflicts and paradoxes of capitalist society (Geoghegan, 2017). Interestingly, the solution that the Palo Alto group offered for escaping double binds on the personal level—metacommunication—has recently been proposed as a remedy for similar entrapments on the social level (Craig, 2016). According to this view, communication scholars should participate in the public discourse about communication so as to provide a critique of commonplace assumptions about it and to offer improved ways to talk about how we communicate.

In a culture already saturated with metadiscourse about "communication," introducing metacommunication (or meta-metacommunication) as a solution may seem naïve. As it is, political and corporate institutions are appropriating communication-related terms to increase their grip on what Dean (2005) terms "communicative capitalism," where "[i]deals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications" (p. 55). A critical assessment of "communication" is important today perhaps more than ever before, precisely when liberal values of communicativity converge with neoliberal corporate rationale and agenda. It seems that the virtues of metacommunication have been subjected to and subsumed by the economic interests of free-flowing communication. Under such conditions, it would be wise to recall the fraught relation between theory and practice. Insisting on the conjunction, yet separation, of theory and practice might help to disclose the dangers in the complete assimilation of communication within practical schemes. There is nothing more practical than theory for reimagining alternative forms of practice.

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