

John H. Weakland (1919–1995): Tribute to a pioneer

Brian Cade*

On Saturday, 8 July 1995, John Weakland died aged 76. Illness had earlier forced him to retire from the Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto, California, where he had been a senior research fellow and a co-director of the Brief Therapy Center. He was also Clinical Associate Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford School of Medicine.

John started out as a chemical engineer but found himself increasingly interested in human behaviour. He attended a couple of courses in anthropology run in New York by Gregory Bateson and subsequently changed career in his late twenties, studying anthropology at Columbia University with a particular interest in Chinese culture.

In 1952, Gregory Bateson was in New York seeking a grant for a research project into the Paradoxes of Abstraction in Communication. He was staying with his former student. As John remembered it:

He came home one afternoon and said, 'I've got a research grant!' I said, 'That's nice.' And he said, 'How would you like to come out to the West Coast and work for me?' Under the circumstances, I said, 'Great!' We all went out and had dinner and celebrated. (Lipset, 1980; p. 200)

Joined the following year by Jay Haley and William Fry, they formed a highly creative, prolific and influential research group, producing many of the early seminal papers in the family therapy field. They studied a wide range of phenomena including, for example, ventriloquism, the training of guide-dogs for the blind, popular films, animal play, humour, hypnosis, schizophrenia and psychotherapy. At the same time, Jackson, a psychiatrist, was developing his ideas on the families of schizophrenics as closed systems. He began working closely with the group and subsequently became a member. They began to

* Private Practice, PO Box 386, Eastwood, NSW 2122, Australia.

look at the multiple channels, each modifying the other, which were involved in all communication, with particular reference to the families of schizophrenics. Their first publication was the hugely influential paper 'Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia' (Bateson *et al.*, 1956), which elaborated the double-bind hypothesis and became their first major exposition of the interactional view.

The double-binding process was described as involving a relationship in which there had been repeated experiences of primary negative injunctions. These would be enforced by signals threatening punishment or abandonment (including the abandonment resulting from a parent's expression of extreme helplessness). There would also be a concurrent secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, also enforced by signals threatening punishment or abandonment. A third injunction prohibits the victim from commenting or leaving the field. It was hypothesized that, once an individual has learned to perceive his or her world in double-binds, almost any part of the sequence may be sufficient to precipitate panic or rage.

John saw this paper as particularly important in that it proposed a new way of looking at the relationship between behaviour and communication. He later commented:

First there was the beginning of a close identification of communication and behaviour, as two sides of one coin, so to speak – that the most important aspect of social behavior is its communicative effect, and that communication is the major factor in the ordering of behavior socially. In pursuing these connections, 'Toward a Theory' certainly took a one-sided or unidirectional view at important points – for example, in seeing a 'binder' imposing a double bind on a 'victim'. Nevertheless, even if less clearly and explicitly, the article also promoted a view of communication as pervasively and basically interactional – as a system, in which unidirectional attributions and various punctuations occur, but where these (even our own) should be seen only as aspects of the larger system . . . what is important for understanding is to see the general pattern of communication, not specific events or messages, however dramatic or striking, in isolation. (Weakland, 1976; p. 311)

It was of considerable concern to John that many who were influenced by 'Toward a Theory' concerned themselves with reductionist hunts for pathological elements (whether they were trying to prove or to refute the double-bind hypothesis) rather than concentrating on larger recurring patterns and seeing the hypothesis as advancing a new language. As he saw it, they thus missed the whole point. As the group were to propose in a note, several years later,

The most useful way to phrase double bind description is *not* in terms of a binder and a victim, but in terms of people caught up in an on-going system which produces conflicting definitions of relationship and consequent subjective distress. (Bateson *et al.*, 1963; p. 159)

Of considerable influence in the development of John's thinking about, and his subsequent practice of, therapy was Milton Erickson. In a recent interview, videotaped just a few months before his death, he was asked what he had learned from Erickson. He replied:

'A great deal . . . I learned something about paying close attention to clients. I learned something about change being always possible even in what appear to be desperate and fixed and concrete situations; and I learned that it's the business of a therapist essentially to take charge and influence people to make changes in useful directions . . . It was remarkable to us to see the things that Erickson could get people to do that were different from what they were accustomed to doing.' (Chaney, 1995; personal communication)

In 1958 Jackson founded the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California, and was joined by Jules Riskin, Virginia Satir and Paul Watzlawick amongst others. John was involved in a number of projects, subsequently becoming a founding member of the Brief Therapy Center, set up in 1966 within the MRI, primarily at the initiative of Dick Fisch. This group had a profound effect on the field of family therapy and on the rapid development of the brief approaches. John described the origins of the project as follows.

'To my mind we only had two or three basic ideas, which led to everything else. One, of course, was that we would work as a group. One person would be the therapist; the others would observe, and then everything would be recorded and discussed.

'But the two main principles that I think were responsible for the directions we took within that framework were, one, that we would focus on the client's main presenting complaint and STICK TO IT; not try to look around it or behind it or beneath it but stick to what's the main presenting complaint. And the other thing was that, by that time, we realised that it was not so easy to get people to change. So . . . we would try anything that we could think of that was legal or ethical regardless of whether it was conventional, or a long, long way from conventional thinking. I think things just grew out of that.' (Chaney, 1995; personal communication)

It is difficult nowadays to appreciate how revolutionary their approach was at that time. In my opinion, the most important notion advanced by the Center was that problems can be seen as developing from, and being maintained by, the way particular and usually quite

normal difficulties are perceived and tackled. Guided by reason, logic, tradition and common sense, various 'attempted solutions' are applied. These have little or no effect or, worse, they exacerbate the situation. Problems then become entrenched as *more of the same* solutions, or classes of solutions, lead to *more or the same* problem, attracting *more of the same* attempted solutions and so on . . . Weakland *et al.* commented:

We assume that once a difficulty begins to be seen as a 'problem,' the continuation, and often the exacerbation, of this problem results from the creation of a positive feedback loop, most often centering round those very behaviours of the individuals in the system that are intended to resolve the difficulty. (Weakland *et al.*, 1974; p. 149)

Therapy was focused on persuading people to change their 'attempted solutions', stopping or even reversing the usual approaches being tried, however logical those approaches appeared to be. Asked what he thought was the most important thing a therapist had to learn, John replied,

'It's going to sound dreadfully simple, but it is also very difficult to do consistently; and that is REALLY listen to what the client says and how they say it; really listen. Which means a number of things. One of the main things it means is, don't get into the business of being so perceptive that you know what the client says or means better than the client does . . . it is very hard to do . . . I am afraid that a lot of training is about being perceptive and I think it is very dangerous. It is much more important to listen . . .' (Chaney, 1995; personal communication)

John was co-author and editor of several books and numerous papers elaborating aspects of the interactional perspective and techniques of brief therapy, including the seminal publications *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution* (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974) and *The Tactics of Change: Doing Therapy Briefly* (Fisch *et al.*, 1982). With Wendel Ray, he had just completed editing a volume of papers entitled *Propagations: Thirty Years of Influence from the Mental Research Institute* (Weakland and Ray, 1995).

Throughout his life John remained an ardent advocate of *The Interactional View*. However, he believed that the implications of the view had barely begun to be realized and was concerned that it was often considered in too narrow a sense. For example, in 1978 he commented that,

Not much has been done from an interactional viewpoint to examine or treat really violent behaviour, even on the clinical scale – such as child abuse – and

almost nothing on the wider social scale, despite the obvious importance of violent behaviour in today's world . . . The interactional view has been largely applied to only one system, that of the family . . . But the world is full of ongoing organizations – business, labor, social, governmental and others – that relate to problems important in people's lives. Even allowing for certain work in anthropology, sociology, and political science, it appears that not very much has been done to apply the interactional view seriously to this wider area of social systems beyond the family. (Weakland, 1978; pp. 94–5)

He was also puzzled that the interactional perspective was accused of implying that all participants in a problem pattern have equal levels of power and influence (for example, see McGregor, 1990), something he had never believed. John was also concerned about what he saw as an increasing reification of 'system', and was particularly alarmed at the recent trend towards evangelism, moralism and dogma in family therapy, rather than careful observation of interaction in context, particularly in the areas of abuse and violence and gender politics.

In 1993, in New Orleans, there was a conference held in his honour attracting many of us who believed that John had for too long hidden his light under a bushel and that his contribution to the field was still too little appreciated by the majority. All who met him commented on his approachability, his generosity and the total absence in him of 'guru' behaviour. He never lost his curiosity, sense of wonder and humour which was always there to moderate a streak of stubbornness and cynicism. I remember many evenings with him, listening to Mozart, a glass of something or other in our hands as we came to the inevitable conclusion that the world was insane. One of my fondest memories is of being persuaded by John to try what he described as a particularly fine malt whisky. At the exact moment that I took the first sip, the earth moved, violently. It was an aftershock from the San Francisco earthquake. We sipped away for the rest of the evening trying to make it work again!

In March 1995 in Saratoga, California, I was privileged to play a part in the last professional gathering John attended. Also at the meeting was Jay Haley, another survivor of the Bateson group, and Dick Fisch and Paul Watzlawick, John's colleagues for so many years at the Brief Therapy Center. It was a moving occasion. His illness was clearly well advanced, yet he stubbornly stayed the course and contributed fully with a typical economy of words, clarity of thought and his humour. His final advice to following generations of therapists was, 'Stay curious!'

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Sky Chaney for his permission to use several quotations from his videotaped interview with John Weakland.

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