
Definition: Bateson, Gregory from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

English-born US anthropologist and cyberneticist. His interests were wide-ranging – from the study of ritual in a New Guinea people to the exploration of communication methods in schizophrenics and dolphins – but all his work shows an interest in how systems operate and a willingness to break down the boundaries between intellectual disciplines. His publications include Steps to an Ecology of Mind 1973 and Mind and Nature 1978.

Summary Article: Bateson, Gregory
From Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology: An Encyclopedia

Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) was a multifaceted scholar who embraced fields as diverse as anthropology, linguistics, semiotics, systems theory, and cybernetics. He was an original thinker whose work influenced the growing environmental movement of his day, contributed to the emergence of new fields of investigation, and continues to exert an influence in a variety of disciplines, including ecological and environmental anthropology.

Life and Work

Bateson was born on May 9, 1904, in Cambridgeshire, England, as the third son of Beatrice Durham and the distinguished geneticist William Bateson. Bateson studied biology with a focus on zoology and natural history at St. John’s College at Cambridge. After completing his BA in 1925, he visited the Galapagos Islands. Bateson began studying anthropology at Cambridge after being introduced to Alfred Haddon in 1926. In January 1927, he went for ethnographic fieldwork to New Guinea. Due to problems of communicating and interacting with the local people, Bateson left the field after a year. He returned to Australia and taught Pacific languages for a semester at the University of Sydney under Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown. In February 1929, Bateson became interested in the Iatmul on a trip to the Sepik River in New Guinea. He conducted a year of fieldwork there with Haddon and Radcliffe-Brown as advisors.

In 1931, Bateson became a fellow of St. John’s College, where he received funding for his ongoing research on the Iatmul. On his return to New Guinea, he met Reo F. Fortune and Margaret Mead, who were conducting fieldwork on a tribe on Manus Island. Bateson's extended conversations with them influenced his theoretical approach and subsequent analysis of his ethnographic data; even though he was supervised by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, his thesis became a methodological criticism of functionalist theory. In January 1936, Bateson completed his study Naven. In the same year, Bateson and Mead married and started conducting their collaborative fieldwork in Bali. During the first 2 months, they coproduced the film Trance and Dance in Bali, before they moved to Bajoeng Gede, where they carried out extensive fieldwork on child-rearing practices, using film and photography as their primary research tools. As the world turned toward war in 1938, Bateson and Mead left Bali to return to New Guinea. After another year, they left for New York, with Mead already pregnant with their first and only daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson. During the subsequent years, Bateson continued working with Mead on previously collected Bali material.

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In the 1940s, Bateson developed an interest in the study of system theory and cybernetics after being invited by Robert Wiener to attend the conferences of the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation. In collaboration with Wiener and Mead, Bateson elaborated on the application of cybernetics to the social and behavioral sciences. At this time, Bateson was also involved in founding the Institute of Cultural Studies, which facilitated anthropological research on national character, including on Germany and Japan. In this context, Bateson carried out research on the Nazi propaganda film *Hitlerjunge Quex* (Hitler Youth Quex). In 1943, he started working for the Office of Strategic Services and spent about 20 months in Ceylon, India, and China; he also investigated the impact of a Japanese radio station on Burma and Thailand.

In the fall of 1947 and spring of 1948, Bateson taught first at the New School of Social Research in New York and then at Harvard University. In late 1949, after being divorced from Mead, Bateson moved to Palo Alto, California. He taught medical anthropology on a 2-year appointment at the Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Clinic in San Francisco. This allowed him to study psychiatric communication in an ethnographic context by using mathematical theories of communication and language. In 1950, Bateson accepted a visiting professorship in anthropology at Stanford University, with main institutional ties to the Veterans Administration Hospital. During that time, he started his communication research on alcoholism and schizophrenic behavior with residents of the hospital.

In 1952, Bateson extended his research interests to the play behavior of otters at the Fleischhacker Zoo in San Francisco. Subsequently, he received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation on the Paradoxes of Abstraction in Communication, which became a major point of departure for his subsequent contribution to anthropological theory. He proposed a theory of play that addresses the different levels of abstraction involved in human and animal communication. In 1956, Bateson started filming forms of nonverbal communication, with a focus on schizophrenic behavior among children. Examining schizophrenia as a learned behavior in processes of family communication, Bateson focused on the principles of family organization, using game theories as his major paradigm. Supported by numerous grants, he continued to study animal behavior in the hope of integrating the patterns of dolphin ethology into the study of patterns in human social interaction.

Bateson elaborated on the idea of an “ecology of mind,” reflecting his doubts about the reductionisms of the natural sciences while advocating a holistic and integrative approach. In 1968, he organized a conference of the Wenner-Gren Foundation on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation. In 1970, he also gave the honorary Alfred Korzybski memorial lecture in New York, titled “Form, Substance, and Difference,” where he proposed a new scientific paradigm: the science of metacommunication. Stimulated by its success, Bateson put together an anthology of his lifework, titled *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. With its publication in 1972, Bateson received worldwide recognition and exerted a wider impact on the environmental movements of his time.

In 1973, Bateson became affiliated with Kresge College at the University of California, Santa Cruz. There he held a lectureship to explore innovative research with a focus on human relational approaches to ecology. During this time, the journal *CoEvolution* was founded to honor his work. In 1975, he revisited his field study on Balinese trance for a special issue of *Ethos* in honor of Mead's work, whom he met with in March 1976 to continue their conversation on visual methods in cultural anthropology. During that time, Bateson became a fellow of the American Academy of Sciences and was appointed to the Board of Regents of the University of California. In his subsequent book, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (1979), Bateson aimed to elaborate his ideas on the coevolution of natural and cultural

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processes. Mary Catherine Bateson helped him finalize the manuscript after he was diagnosed with cancer. Bateson died on July 4, 1980, at the age of 76, at the guesthouse of the Zen Center in San Francisco.

Work

The work of Bateson is highly original, although the thematic fields it addresses may appear unrelated. His impact on anthropological theory is not readily identifiable because his most original ideas were often articulated in abstract terms and published in places where they could not immediately be recognized as part of the anthropological endeavor. Bateson's legacy lies in the formation of new analytical concepts and theoretical approaches. While his early work in New Guinea was dedicated to the study of the dynamics of cultural change, which he called schismogenesis, his subsequent work in Bali focused on nonverbal communication, leading him to theorize about play, framing, and forms of metacommunication. His idea of the ecology of mind was elaborated on the application of cybernetics to the study of social systems and expanded on related notions of feedback processes and the double bind, a situation in which a person cannot succeed or win no matter what he or she does.

Schismogenesis and the Dynamics of Cultural Change

In his first and only ethnographic study, *Naven*, Bateson conceptualized individual behavior and social structure in Iatmul culture as a dynamic system based on interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationships. Bateson rejected reductionism and avoided deducing individual behavior from social structure or inducing social structure from individual behavior. He conceived both individual behavior and social structure as embedded in mutual relationships and viewed social interactions as leading toward a provisional equilibrium of social relationships that always has the potential for immediate change. Bateson conceptualized the dynamics in social relations in terms of *schismogenesis*, the process of differentiation in social groups resulting from continuous interactions. Bateson conceived the formation of social structure and the configuration of social relations as emerging from social interactions.

Bateson understood schismogenesis as a conceptual scheme for analyzing cultural change, suggesting that anthropologists should not limit the study of cultural change to effects that are determined by external factors. He argued that the analysis of change within a single culture required the examination of cases of contact between different groups within the culture and that age, sex, social status, and kinship were key markers of different group membership. He considered the possible resolution of disturbances resulting from the interaction of different groups as a merely temporary equilibrium in an ongoing chain of reactions to reactions. In this way, he understood social structure as always having an inherently temporal dimension.

Bateson proposed that the outcome of disturbances in social relations was either complementary or symmetrical schismogenesis, the former resulting in unequal and the latter resulting in equal relationships of the social groups involved. In the complementary form of schismogenesis, two groups mutually provoke and reinforce reactions with each other. The inequalities in gender relations, parent-child relations, or class struggle are examples of mutually reinforcing patterns of dominant-submissive behavior. In the symmetrical form of schismogenesis, the interaction of the groups provokes similar forms of behavior. Some examples are arms races, public contests, or sporting events. Both forms of schismogenesis lead to a temporary balance through the subordination or competition of the groups involved, but they can also lead to conflict, fissures, and sometimes disastrous outcomes.
Based on his research on nonverbal communication in child-rearing practices and his visual material on rituals of spirit possession in Bali, Bateson proposed a systematic approach to the study of personality and culture. In this context, he also inquired into the formation of moral behavior and national ethos by taking theories of frustration and aggression as a reference point for studying the cultural formation of ethos. Subsequently, he utilized these theoretical insights to develop his theory of framing, play, and metacommunication. In his 1955 article “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” he introduced the notion of framing as a form of metacommunication and addressed “framing” as a marker in social interaction that nonverbally changes the meaning and context of social interaction, as exemplified in the distinction between play and nonplay. The messages communicated within the play frame are metacommunicative and have a different meaning from those communicated outside the frame.

Bateson theorized that metacommunication was about social relations. Metacommunicative statements establish the relationship between interacting persons. The main feature with which Bateson distinguished communication from metacommunication was the difference between sign and signal that, he proposed, was recognizable in nonverbal communication. While Bateson conceived signs as unintentional and involuntary and therefore indexical (indicating some state of affairs), he defined signals as intentionally and voluntarily used and therefore conventional. The difference between the sign and the signal can be exemplified by the distinction between a twitch of an eyelid and a wink, the former being unintentional, while the latter may carry a clear message. This difference between sign and signal, according to Bateson, coincided with the evolution of human communication. Working on the hypothesis that metacommunication is integral to the growth of the human species prior to language, Bateson studied primate behavior at San Francisco’s Fleishhacker Zoo in 1952. This research provided him with evidence that the predominant ways in which primates recognize the difference between signs and signals is play. Bateson took this ability to make such distinctions as a precondition for the differentiation of levels of abstraction in human communication.

Bateson conceived of play as a metacommunicative phenomenon of its own kind, bringing to the forefront categorically different levels of abstraction established through the play frame. He argued that play involves forms of metacommunication through which organisms differentiate between play and nonplay. The distinction between sign and signal in metacommunication is exemplified by different types of messages transmitted in play behavior: (1) messages used as signs to express moods, (2) messages used as signals to simulate moods, and (3) messages used to distinguish between the first two types of message. For Bateson, the metacommunicative message, like “This is play,” is of the last type, allowing the distinction between expression (i.e., the twitch or bite as a sign) and simulation (i.e., the wink or playful nip as a signal). These different messages are pertinent to play between, for example, children who pretend to act as parents or dogs who pretend to fight. The ability to perceive the difference between play and nonplay leads to higher levels of abstraction consisting of the metacommunicative message “This is play.” Bateson perceived play as a form of learning that leads to higher levels of abstraction.

Using threat, theatrical behavior, and deceit as examples of metacommunication, Bateson argued that play implies a peculiar form of metacommunication. In framing, the metacommunicative message sets up hierarchical relationships between different levels of abstraction. Irony, teasing, or joking relationships may serve as further examples for the different frames of reference used in play behavior, where the interactive sequences of actions transmit signals that are “similar” to but
“fundamentally different” from those they usually denote. Because the play frame transmits metacommunicative statements on different levels of abstraction, the respective frame creates the self-referential paradox. For Bateson, the message “This is play” is paradoxical because it is a negative statement that itself contains a negative metastatement. The metacommunicative message transmitted applies to different categorical orders depending on whether it is transmitted from inside or outside the frame. These statements are selfreflexive and context dependent as they refer back to the position from which they are made and exclude the possibility that they can transmit metacommunicative statements independent of the frame.

**Cybernetics, Feedback Processes, and the Double Bind**

Bateson elaborated on forms of metacommunication in relation to theories of codification and abstraction. He primarily used cybernetics and system theories to develop a theoretical model to distinguish between different forms of codification in animal and human communication. Employing mathematical information theory and cybernetics, Bateson furthered a framework that allowed him to conceptualize the self-referential paradoxes in metacommunication. Although *cybernetics*, coined after a Greek term, broadly refers to various kinds of automatic control systems, Bateson was particularly interested in its application to the social sciences and the evolution and forms of animal and human communication. He conceived of cybernetic circuits primarily as systems of communication. Such systems of communication respond to the information they receive from their environment. Bateson employed cybernetic models in the codification and transmission of information. Such information makes a difference between the real and the ideal state of affairs and transforms the system of communication by adjusting to the difference between the real and the ideal state. As a result, the process of communication between the real and the ideal leads to a temporary homeostasis, or the steady state.

Elaborating on the cybernetic insights as proposed by Wiener, Bateson analyzed systems of nonverbal communication within the framework of positive and negative feedback by applying them to situations of social interactions. Positive feedback refers to messages that communicate change, whereas negative feedback refers to messages that communicate control. In this respect, the cybernetic model stipulates the explanation of transformation in terms of serial and reciprocal cause-and-effect chains. Bateson argued that forms of metacommunication occur in organisms that are capable of establishing a higher level of abstraction by giving negative feedback to their immediate environments through means of control or self-regulation. The metacommunicative message establishes the rules that govern the subsequent behavior of the participants, and negative feedback means the enforcement of changes in social relationships.

In using his ethnographic material from New Guinea and Bali and expanding his concept of schismogenesis, Bateson further elaborated on the cybernetic model. His main contribution is his theory of the double bind as a way to explore forms of systemically distorted forms of communication and interaction. According to Bateson, the double bind can be explained in reference to misled forms of learning, namely to distinguish different levels of abstraction. Bateson defined double bind as a sequence of messages, in which the messages communicated lead to a paradox where the verbal message contradicts the nonverbally communicated message and where the one who is in a subordinate position can only lose. In his research on schizophrenia, the codification of a message is altered, and the form of learning is distorted, leading to an inability to discriminate different contextual cues, because what is said persistently contradicts what is done. In the study of alcoholism, Bateson...
exemplified his insights in the alcoholics’ unwillingness to acknowledge the fact that they are alcoholics.

**Contribution to Anthropology**

Bateson's contribution to anthropology and his impact on the formation of theoretical approaches to anthropology have been significant, and his form of engagement in using system theory and cybernetics for analyzing cultural practices has proven fruitful. The most important contributions of Bateson can be seen in his theory of framing as well as his contribution to the study of play as forms of metacommunication. His studies in nonverbal communication led to the field of kinesics and proxemics, and symbolic interaction, as the studies of Ray Birdwhistell and Erving Goffman demonstrate. His considerations of play had a significant impact on the formation of ritual theories as proposed by Roy Rappaport, Don Handelman, and Michael Houseman.

Bateson had also a more direct impact on anthropological research, inspiring Clifford Geertz's system-theoretical approach to religion and culture as related to the study of Balinese rituals, and laid some theoretical groundwork for Geertz's method of thick description. Steven Feld and Deborah Tannen adopted Bateson's theory of schismogenesis for the anthropological study of ethnomusicology and sociolinguistics, and Rene Girard used Bateson's notion of the double bind in his theory of sacrifice. Bateson's use of film and photography helped facilitate the methodological enhancement of visual anthropology, and his impact can be seen in the work of Maya Deren and Jean Rouch and their participatory approach to visual anthropology. Besides that, Bateson's approach to the ecology of mind had a lasting impact on ecological and environmental anthropology that approaches ecology from system theory.

**See also** Culture and Personality; Geertz, Clifford; Malinowski, Bronislaw; Mead, Margaret; Radcliffe-Brown, A. R.; Rappaport, Roy; Visual Anthropology

**Further Readings**


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