

Binds and Unbinds

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REVOLVING, SPIRALLING, mushrooming processes cannot be described in linear fashion, and there lies one of the major problems in explicating the pivotal variables which comprise the field of interaction in a family. In an attempt to develop a testable hypothesis about interaction systems in families with a schizophrenic child, I conducted a series of pilot interviews to determine the nature and content of the rules in the family. It became apparent, however, that it was not the existence of the rule which caused the disorder, but rather the way in which the rule was implemented and incorporated into a system of interaction. There was a patterned process in gyrating motion of which the components fed, reinforced and derived from a particular system of interaction. This paper will present an excerpt from a family interview which dramatizes the family's characteristic habits of behavior and interaction. The theoretical frame of reference derives from social systems concepts (4, 10, 15) and from recent studies in the interaction field in families (3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14).

The specific system of interaction in this type of family will be described here as a process of binds and unbinds. This is not a reference to simple binds but to the double bind described by Bateson et al. (1, 2, 5, 6, 7). This is a communication mode in which contradictory injunctions are expressed on different levels of abstraction, and where something is shifted from one level of abstraction to another in order to conceal or disguise its meaning. When one member of a family places a reciprocal in such a bind, the reciprocal attempts to remove himself from the bind—to unbind himself. There are various ways in which this can be accomplished, but in the process being described,

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the reciprocal unbinds himself by placing the binding member in another bind, and in this process of binding and unbinding, the family members place themselves in a convoluting series of more and more confused binds, increasingly distant from their sources of origin, and increasingly disguised. The result is a process in which meaninglessness is effected in a context of contending to be meaningful; ambiguity and equivocation in a context of professing to be clear cut and explicit; concealment in a context of ostensible openness; and disguise in a context of revelation. It is both implicit and explicit, subtle and crude. The multiple sources of this process include the life history of each family member, the life history of the family group, the family's network of connections and cultural setting, and the family's particular manner of interaction and relationship. Despite the manifold dimensions of this process, its nature is persistent, consistent and ubiquitous.

The systematic manner in which a particular family embraces this process will be demonstrated with an excerpt from a recorded family interview of the "Crane" family. The members include Herman, forty-seven year old father, Betty, forty-three year old mother, and Lilly, their one child of eleven.

Lilly was hospitalized in August 1962 at a children's psychiatric unit in a small psychiatric hospital connected with one of the major West Coast universities. She was initially referred by her school because of her inability to relate to peers, her use of a private language, social withdrawal and bizarre behavior. She was diagnosed as childhood schizophrenia. Lilly was discharged as a day patient in August, 1963. This paper does not deal with those aspects of Lilly's treatment administered by the resident and other hospital staff but focuses primarily on those family processes revealed in the course of casework with the parents.

Although the life history of both parents provides a plethora of relevant material, the striking characteristic of each individual is a deeply entrenched fear of conflict and differences, and a total commitment to the illusion of family togetherness. Herman, himself an only child, perceives his early life as a series of potentially devastating conflicts which he avoided by quiet submission and compliance. He lived in a series of eight foster homes between the ages of five and thirteen, after his parents divorced and dispersed to other cities. Throughout the remainder of his adolescent years, he lived with his mother and a contentious and alcoholic stepfather. When he was thirty-two years old,

he married, anticipating the fulfillment of a lifelong dream of a closely-knit family. Never having experienced close, interpersonal relations, he aspired to a utopian image which found fruition in the partnership with a woman so specialized in creating images that her adumbrated reality was barely accessible to her.

Betty also views her past life as one lurking with potential clashes which she shunned with a honey-mouthed, ingratiating, unctuous attitude. Fearful lest the expression of a strong feeling might lead to disaster, Betty developed a communication mode intended to disguise and neutralize her expressions. She accomplishes this by over-elaboration, over-explaining, contradicting, denying what she affirms and vice versa so that the listener is lost in a maze of detail. Betty was the baby and the pet of her parents and four siblings, the closest of whom was ten years her senior. Her father's occupation required frequent moves so that she never lived in one place for more than a year. She had neither close friends nor relationships during her life, and expended her energies in creating the appearance of friendship and closeness. She selected a husband who seemed able to play the complimentary role in the game of creating illusions.

These parents manifested a seemingly impenetrable defense against knowing or being known intimately by others. Father's defenses crumbled somewhat when his daughter was defined as psychotic and he manifested a growing capacity for meditation, examination and revelation. But mother, throughout the major part of casework, and after five years of prior psychotherapy, persistently produced a rich variety of tenacious defenses against interpersonal closeness.

The excerpt which follows was selected from a recorded interview that took place nine months after Lilly's hospitalization.

Father: For example, yesterday I had to do something I didn't want to. I wasn't even consulted until the die was cast almost. Betty decided and talked to Lilly about it and

Mother: Well, I talked to Lilly about it before I took my cue.

Father: And then came to me and told me what was up and even though I didn't want to, why, I went along with it. I was tired. I had spent several hours working out in the back yard and I thought the way it was handled, why I certainly had to go along with it whether I wanted to or not.

Caseworker: How did you feel about that?

Father: Well, I was resentful about it except I thought it was

basically a good idea and under ordinary circumstances I would have been more wholeheartedly in favor of it than I was yesterday.

Caseworker: How did it come about?

Mother: Well, Herman and I had been seated on the back porch steps. This was something I had wondered about our talking about today anyway. Because I was wondering if I had handled it wrong and I was wondering about Herman's reaction to it when it developed later and he said to me, um, oh, what was it? I don't know whether you used the word pressured or what, but anyway, I was wondering if you felt that way and if therefore I had handled it incorrectly. And I had conflicts about it because I thought this advice to me to make decisions on my own, and uh, I thought, well, gosh, if he doesn't want to, he should let us know. It's nothing that's definite. Speak up. It started out on the back porch while he was having a cool drink. We were commenting on the fact that we had, well, we had discussed before the possibility of a barbecue depending on the weather and this was early afternoon and we were just commenting that the weather didn't look too good. We might as well have our ground beef patties indoors, you know, at dinner, indoors, without the bun, and we sort of let it go at that. Well, I got to thinking. This little gal was kinda going back to her younger play habits and so forth a bit yesterday, weren't you dear, and . . . So we just sort of mentioned this. The weather wasn't too good and we would just have our plain hamburgers inside. And he said he didn't care to have the buns with them and so forth. And I got to thinking of Lilly and her day; that she hadn't uh had anything special. She wasn't about to have a friend over. She wasn't doing anything particularly constructive that was fun, and, uh, the sun began to seep through a little bit, and all this put together, I got to thinking, well, uh, why don't Herman and I ask her about this, and then I thought, no, here we go putting a responsibility where it doesn't belong the way we did one Sunday morning with putting the decision to her, so what I did was to say to Lilly, "Well, Lilly, daddy and I have about decided that maybe the weather isn't quite good enough to, uh, have a barbecue outside. Maybe we'll just have our ground meat inside." And, uh, then I got to thinking, well sharp as she is in her feelings, she's going to know maybe why I'm saying this, so I'll, to be clear cut and unconfused about it, I'll just say it. I said, "Of

course you know I'm saying this to get your reaction." And she said, "Aw, aw, let's have a barbecue, aw c'mon. I'd want to barbecue outside if it weren't either snowing or raining." And, uh, so I said, "Do you very much want it or just kinda want it," and she said, "Very much, please."

So I went out and told Herman. I didn't have time to tell him all the details of how this took place, but that I had felt her out on this and she seemed anxious to have a barbecue and that the weather was a little bit better and maybe could we, after all, and, uh, he said something, right at that point, spontaneously, that, uh, made me think—oh, did I handle it wrong, because he said—do you remember exactly what you said?

Father: Well, I think I said something to the effect that I was sort of put in a position where I had to go along with it because I hadn't been consulted and I was being pressured to go through with it and uh, by that time, I had been working in the back yard about three or four hours and I was ready to drop. I was in the middle of doing a difficult job of trimming an overgrown hedge and when a barbecue is held, it means that I do quite a bit of the work and I just wasn't in the mood to go through all that work after having put in a hard physical afternoon out there, and it seemed to me that two things were wrong with this picture; one that she had gone ahead and put this idea in Lilly's head and of course Lilly would want to go ahead and do it then, without first having discussed it with me at all, so that it was sort of a *fait accompli*, as it were. And number two, if she couldn't see how tired I was, well, I thought it was kind of, uh, uh, inconceivable that she couldn't tell I was about ready to drop. And it made me mad that she was kinda blind to my situation, so I was rather blunt in my remarks and so finally she went off after I had expressed my feeling in no uncertain terms I thought. And then, later on, it was as though I hadn't told her, as though she hadn't gotten the message, how I felt about it. I sorta felt that she made up her mind to do it and wanted to do it, and

Mother: Well, I told you right that very minute, after your very first response that if you were too tired, we wouldn't do it, but then you insisted—no, that we go on with it.

Father: Well, because I thought it was useless to do anything else.

Mother: (Sighing) We weren't communicating.

Father: Well, I'm sure that there wasn't full communication, or if there was, it was too late.

Caseworker: (To father) If you didn't want to do it, why didn't you make the decision not to?

Father: Well, I didn't want to be arbitrary about it and say no, I won't do it because I'm tired, but I wanted her to know I was doing it because the die was cast as it were, and she had sort of committed herself to doing it with Lilly, and Lilly would like to do it, and I thought, well, I'll do it even though I'm doing it under protest.

Mother: Oh, it wasn't a hundred per cent sure with Lilly, and I thought I made that clear too. I just came out to tell you she would very much like it and so, could we? But you didn't give me a No answer.

Father: Well, I did everything but come out and say No in so many words. I thought there was no mistaking how I felt about it. How did you think I felt about it?

Mother: Well, I got the message that you didn't like the way I handled it and then I was a little bit confused because I thought, here I was supposed to be making some decisions more on my own, and I make one and do the wrong thing, darn it (laugh). And, uh, the decision was to broach the subject to Lilly. The decision was not to have the barbecue because that was still up to you, but, uh, the decision was to find out how she felt about it, and how strongly and so forth. And, uh, then I thought that you felt though that the decision to have it absolutely had been made and that you felt you'd been railroaded or something, but when I urged you to say no if you were very much against it, after all (laugh), you have as much say as she does. More. Well, then you wouldn't say no, I just really rather we wouldn't today or no

Father: You got the feeling I was strongly against it though.

Mother: Uh, that you would rather not, but that you were going along because she wanted it apparently. But I thought if you were very, very strongly against it, that you would say, no, let's not.

Father: You didn't feel that I was strongly against it?

Mother: Well, not strongly enough to say no.

Father: In other words, I would have to say no, to make it formal. There'd be no other way for me to change the decision other than to come out and say, to formally say, to express my feelings, in spite of all the other things I had done to get my message through I thought.

Mother: Well, just say, well, no, really, I don't want to go along with that this afternoon. I, uh, the weather is not right, or, uh, I

don't want us to do it. Cause later on, when I asked you about it again, even later, I said, "Well, look, we still don't have to go through with it if you're too tired," and you said "Oh, no, it's not that I'm too tired, it's just that I wasn't particularly in the mood this afternoon." Remember that?

Father: I also remember when we discussed it, I said "Apparently all the hints I dropped didn't get to you. You didn't get the message."

Caseworker: (To Lilly) What do you think, are you parents arguing?

Lilly: I think sort of they are.

Caseworker: What do you think about that?

Lilly: It's kind of strange. It makes me feel kind of puzzled. If somebody loves each other, why should they argue?

Caseworker: (To Parents) Maybe the two of you don't want to be sure it's an argument either.

Lilly: How much does a tape recorder cost?

The discussion will deal with some of the major dimensions that comprise this family's interaction system; a system which produces the deeply entrenched, self perpetuating, self enforcing system of binds and unbinds.

Pseudo-mutuality, used in the sense that Lyman Wynne (16) intended, appears as the superordinate value in the family. This central value is safeguarded and defended by a number of methods, some of which involve avoidance of conflict at all costs, avoidance of defined differences and differentiations, basing action on assumptions made about one another rather than on actual information, and a communication style which renders interchanges meaningless or neutralizes them so that their meaning cannot be discerned. Pseudo-mutual families seem to fear that the momentary loss or appearance of close mutuality results in disaster, thus much of the family's energy store is directed towards maintaining this illusion. In the excerpt, mother's attempt to avoid conflict with father resulted in a tangle of ambiguous messages, one of which was the explicit statement to Lilly of the vague decision not to have the barbecue, immediately followed by an implicit adjuration to Lilly to formulate the decision.

The inability to differentiate the feelings of one from the other in the family seems interwoven with the entire process. Both parents respond to Lilly on the basis of assumptions they make about her feelings and thoughts and not on information about them. These assumptions usually consist of projections of the parents thoughts and feelings.

This provides them with an escape valve for problems and frustrations threatening to burst into the open, and a safe arena in which to express their unresolved, albeit disguised, conflicts. At the same time, it protects their image of the conflict-free family. When Lilly requests impersonal information, mother often assumes that this is a message intended to disguise feeling unloved. Mother responds to Lilly with a reassurance that she is loved. Lilly, confused by the irrelevancy of mother's response, will herself respond with irrelevant and often bizarre behavior. Mother then assumes that Lilly is feeling increasingly insecure and continues to reassure her that she is loved and wanted. By this time, Lilly usually hugs mother so tightly she bruises her. When father complains, mother effectively denies the meaning of his complaint by countercomplaining about the lack of togetherness in the family. Thus, in the context of a complaint, mother demands an absence of complaint.

It appears that one of the chief derivative sources for the process of binding and unbinding lies in internal binds of the individual members, e.g. father's resentment of mother's flagrant ineptitude to perform routine household chores is in conflict with his need for mother to provide him with the image of the well-functioning, ideally harmonic family. To make an unequivocal demand for efficiency from mother would be tantamount to a demand that she grow up. The fear that mother's growing up or away from him will constitute a loss of the relationship, coupled with his need for her to provide him with the image of the stable, well-run home presents him with an internal bind which expresses itself in a contradictory injunction to mother. On one level of abstraction, he encourages her childlike behavior for fear that growth will lead to destruction of the relationship, and on another level of abstraction he discourages her childlike behavior by refusing to play a role complementary to it.

This is gross oversimplification. Only a slice of this family's vast network of binds and unbinds has been extracted to indicate the manner in which this self-perpetuating process may lead to the disorganization of one of the family members.

Professional standards of "healthy" functioning appeared to the Cranes, throughout the course of casework, as a malignant intruder threatening to destroy the only mode of relationship that existed in their range of experience. Yet the family actively participated and resisted in an examination of their habits of behavior. This basic in-

teraction pattern continued, but in a way which included occasional thrusts into new, unfamiliar ways of relating and communicating.

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