

A RELATIONAL ALTERNATIVE TO THE METAPHOR OF POWER

by Douglas Flemons, Ph.D. *

Abstract

The legitimacy of the notion of "power," originally debated by Gregory Bateson and Jay Haley, continues to be a point of contention among family therapy theorists and clinicians. This paper discusses power as an artifact of Newtonian science and examines some of the serious problems that can arise when such a metaphor is used as an explanatory device for human interaction. The ideas of "consensus" and "dissensus" are developed as alternative, pattern-oriented notions which are more in keeping with the cybernetic epistemology proposed by Bateson.

Consensus/Dissensus:

A Relational Alternative to the Metaphor of Power

This paper is intended as a contribution to the ongoing dialogue in the field of family therapy concerning the legitimacy of the notion of "power" for characterizing the nature of human interaction. This controversy, which Rabkin (1978) considers to be the "epistemological core of family therapy" (p. 485), began as an argument in the 1950's between Gregory Bateson and Jay Haley when they were both working on Bateson's research project on communication [1952-1962]. Haley (1976b) remembers it in the following way:

The issue of power and control was always a problem within the project. It seemed to me that how much power one person would allow another to have over him was a central issue in human life. . . . The moral issue whether one should or should not struggle for power seemed to introject itself into the study of the phenomenon. . . . I was trying at that time to shift observation of the individual to the observation of a system and to view a power struggle as a product of the needs of a system rather than the needs of a person. I still prefer that view. . . . (p. 78)

Whereas Haley took power to be an a priori fact, Bateson (1976) viewed it as an inappropriate metaphor: "Haley slides too lightly over very real epistemological differences between himself and me. As I saw it, he believed in the validity of the metaphor of 'power' in human relations" (p. 106). In a conversation with David Lipset (1982) Haley talked of Bateson's dislike of power:

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He didn't even like the word... If I said that a therapist should take power, he didn't like that. If I said a therapist shouldn't take power, he didn't like that either... About ten years [after the project ended], I met Bateson at a party in New York, and... we got into an argument that we'd had in 1959 - exactly the same issues and the same positions. (p. 226).

Over the years others in the field have gotten involved in the dispute (e.g., Rabkin, 1978; Keeney, 1979, 1983; Madanes, 1981, 1984; Hoffman, 1985), and a recent article by MacKinnon and Miller (1987) illustrates that the issue is far from settled. These latter authors, in a paper which critically examines the sociopolitical implications of the "new epistemology" (second order cybernetics) and the Milan approach, argue that:

In dismissing "power," the cybernetic paradigm has not developed new metaphors that identify differential social benefits.

By defining power simplistically, dismissing it and offering no other description for inequity in relationships characterized by domination and exploitation, the new epistemology lies in danger of mystifying issues concerning inequality in social arrangements. (MacKinnon & Miller, 1987, p. 147)

MacKinnon and Miller identify what they consider to be a theoretical lacuna in cybernetics; they are concerned that the notion of reciprocal relationship blurs the differential degree to which participants in a relationship influence the nature of their interaction. The authors thus turn to power as a way of addressing such structured inequality. Their critique adds richness to a complex argument and offers support for a "pro-power" position.

Theoretical disagreements about power revolve around three primary issues:

1. What is the nature of language — i.e., is power "real" or metaphoric?
2. Even if accepted as the latter, is it appropriate to use a lineal, quasi-physical metaphor drawn from the world of quantity as an explanatory device for the recursive, patterned world of living systems?
3. If a cybernetic paradigm is embraced and power is banished from our storehouse of systemic metaphors, have we not robbed ourselves of a way of characterizing social inequality and differential responsibility?

In order to adequately address such issues, this paper will re-examine some of the reasons for Bateson's allergy to power

and suggest some alternative notions which are more in keeping with a cybernetic view.

POWER

The use of power as an explanatory device is an epistemological artifact of eighteenth-century physical science and empirical philosophy. According to John Locke (1690),

Power..is another of those simple Ideas which we receive from Sensation and Reflection. For observing in ourselves, that we do and can think, and that we can, at pleasure, move several parts of our Bodies which were at rest; the effects also, that natural Bodies are able to produce in one another, occurring every moment to our Senses, we both these ways get the Idea of Power.

(p. vii; cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, p. 2263)

For Locke the idea of power is a given: the ability to think is power, and thought supposedly allows him to recognize power as it operates within the body and out in the world, producing effects in natural bodies. Power is a power-full idea, and the ability to have such ideas is power itself. This mobius strip of self-verification portrays power as real.

Locke (1690) also uses power to explain movement. The atomistic paradigm of his day created a world of isolated, static objects. In this milieu, power is like a pure verb—it is the process which is added to things in order to animate them: "we can, at pleasure, move several parts of our Bodies which were at rest" (p. vii). If you see things as being isolated, then you won't look for explanations in the *relations between things*; you will look for something that resides *inside* the objects themselves.¹ In a world of insular objects, any phenomenon of relationship or change will be explained in terms of reified process. Thus "power" — which can be stored as "potential" and released as "force" — becomes a necessary explanatory metaphor.

Attempting to recast our habits of thought and action according to the principles of cybernetics and systems theory, Bateson (1979) challenged this linguistic legacy of Newtonian physics. He distinguishes between *pleroma* (the non-living), "where forces and impacts provide sufficient basis of explanation," and *creatura* (the living), "where nothing can be understood until *differences and distinctions are invoked*" (pp. 7-8). Metaphors from the world of *pleroma* are insufficient to account for the intricate, informational complexity of living systems.²

1 Bateson (1979, p. 95), borrowing from Moliere's *Le Malade Imaginaire*, called these kind of empty explanations "dormitive principles." The mistake is in looking inside one component of a relationship for an explanation which must take into account the relationship itself.

2 Jay Haley (1976a) doesn't recognize the necessity for the distinction — in fact he ignores it completely. According to him, "information and power are synonymous" (p. 218).

In principle, all metaphors derived from a physical world of impacts, forces, energy, etc., are unacceptable in explanations of events and processes in the biological world of information, purpose, context, organization and meaning. The 'power' metaphor ... must be looked at as a functioning falsehood or error, causing what pathologies? (Bateson, 1974, pp. 26-27)

Power may not be "real" in the sense in which Locke understood it to be, but organizing one's thought and action in accord with such metaphors can be dangerous:

It is not so much "power" that corrupts as the *myth* of "power." It was noted above that "power," like "energy," "tension," and the rest of the quasi-physical metaphors are to be distrusted and, among them, "power" is one of the most dangerous. He who covets a mythical abstraction must always be insatiable! (Bateson, 1979, p. 248)

Despite Bateson's influence on the field of family therapy, many theorists, following Haley (e.g., 1976a), continue to characterize relational patterns in terms of "power issues" (e.g., Beavers, 1985; Hoffman, 1981; Madanes, 1981, 1984; Ritterman, 1986). Unwilling to disregard what they consider compelling evidence of the "existence" of power, these writers choose instead to discount Bateson's admonitions. As Madanes (1981) puts it:

It has . . . been said that power may be a myth, a dangerous metaphor to be mistrusted (Bateson, 1980). Yet the influence of one nation over another or the power of the rich over the poor cannot be ignored . . .

Power is an important factor in human relations; therefore, if one is organizing families, the issue of power is a main concern. It is difficult to imagine how the relevance of power to human relations can be denied when people lock each other up, murder each other, or devote their lives to helping one another. (pp. 217-218)

The mobius logic of Madanes' stance is reminiscent of John Locke's; she offers examples of social injustice as empirical proof of the objective reality of a *construct* used to explain them. Bograd (1985) similarly insists that "power exists and... must be taken into account, not denied" (cited in Rawot, 1986). As Keeney (1983) comments, "belief in the myth of power is self-verifying since it is a habit of punctuation" (p.131).

The cybernetician's argument is not whether "power" exists. That question is epistemologically irrelevant because it assumes that there can be an objective proof (or disproof) of its existence. The relevant criticism is directed at the consequences of an epistemological habit of punctuating the world in terms of power. Bateson's work attempts to demonstrate how such a punctuation reinforces greed and corruption in all those

who believe in the "reality" of "social power," whether they think they have it or not. (Keeney, 1983, p. 132)

MacKinnon and Miller (1987) disagree with Bateson's assertion. As evidence in support of a "power" punctuation, they point out instances when conceptualizing in these terms is likely to be of social benefit:

One need only look, however, to the history of the black civil rights, feminist, gay, and disability movements to see that this is not so [i.e., that power is always destructive]. When those with little social influence organize, think, and act in the world in terms of power, the result has, at times, been a movement toward greater social justice. (p. 145)

Further, they claim that the cybernetic paradigm fails to adequately address social inequality and domination in social relationships. In the name of radical social analysis, these authors decry Bateson's and Keeney's rejection of "power" punctuations, suggesting that it reflects a "sociopolitical conservatism" (p. 153). Their suggested cure for the inherent inequalities of "the system" is the achievement of "equal power" for all:

A social action paradigm is concerned with the differential distribution of resources within society, such as wealth, privilege and political power. Social "problems," from this perspective, represent conflicts over the control of these resources and would not exist if the status quo were not to the economic and political advantage of certain groups. (MacKinnon & Miller, 1987, p.140)

Just how radical is this view? By arguing in favour of "more power" for the oppressed, MacKinnon and Miller ostensibly champion the rights and privileges of the disadvantaged; however this characterization implicitly legitimizes the organizing principle of Western economic and political domains, i.e., that "more is better." A problem of pattern (e.g., the nature of the *relationship between men and women*, or between countries) is conceptualized in terms of an encapsulated (and abstract) quantity (e.g., "that group has all the power") and the solution is envisioned in keeping with society's organizing principle (e.g., "social problems would be rectified if only this underprivileged group had *more power*").

This introduces a major flaw in the concept of power:

Bateson argues that the main criterion separating the metaphor "power" from ecosystemic epistemology involves the matter of transitivity. The metaphor of power suggests transitivity — that more power will always be more powerful. However, this idea is anti-ecological. (Keeney, 1979, p.123)

In ecological systems uni-directional change is always only a subset of more complete, circuitous interaction:

Desired substances, things, patterns, or sequences of experience that are in some sense "good" for the

organism — items of diet, conditions of life, temperature, entertainment, sex, and so forth — are never such that more of the something is always better than less of the something. Rather, for all objects and experiences, there is a quantity that has optimum value. Above that quantity, the variable becomes toxic. To fall below that value is to be deprived. (Bateson, 1979, p. 59)

Consider as illustration the nuclear arms build-up, a situation where the politics of power are at a premium, and where the danger of transitive thinking is at its peak. The nuclear threat has given us the opportunity to experience the terrifying absurdity of the epistemology of power when carried to its logical conclusions. The reasoning followed by the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R in this escalation is really no different from that proposed by MacKinnon and Miller (1987): each participant in the relationship attempts to rectify a perceived inequality in power by striving to get more of it.³ This lineal goal doubtless appears reasonable to those examining their own position in isolation, but when considered in the cybernetic context of interrelation it is clear that such behaviour will only engender a similar reaction on the part of the other. By getting inducted into the vicious spiral of this particular form of insanity, any group or individual engaging in what they punctuate as a "power struggle" is supporting an epistemology which threatens the future of the planet. As Helen Caldicott (1984) points out, the year 1945 marked the end of "more" being better and the beginning of it being very very dangerous.

Before 1945, it was true that the more conventional weapons the country possessed, the safer it was. Since 1945, any attempt by one country to engineer a superiority in numbers of nuclear weapons has been followed by the other country's matching the numbers games.... Ironically, by participating in the crazy logic of nuclear-war-fighting plans and scenarios, America has engineered her own suicide. (p. 308)

Each country mistakes the physical destructive capability of a fissioned atom to be somehow equivalent to political or military "power." Failing to recognize the cybernetic nature of their relationship, both participants continue to attempt a lineal control of the other by amassing more and more bombs. This belief in unilateral control is a concomitant of the "crazy logic" to which Caldicott (1984) refers — the transitive logic of power.⁴

3 Wilden (1972) would claim, and no doubt MacKinnon and Miller (1987) would agree, that the relationship between the two superpowers is not an appropriate analogue of the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. Whereas the former is a symmetrical battle, the latter is complementary. However the *logic* followed by the participants is the same in both cases: each believes the existing problems can be solved with additional power.

4 The recently ratified INF treaty, abolishing medium - and shorter-range nuclear missiles, has not altered the prevailing belief that it is best to negotiate from a position of "superior power."

The problem with the notion of control is that it fails to recognize that an individual in a system is always part of that system and "is therefore subject to all the constraints and necessities of the particular part-whole relationship in which he exists" (Bateson, 1974, p. 27). The individual can never be completely "in charge" of this relationship:

Consider what "in charge" is commonly supposed to mean. We say that the steersman is in charge of the ship, and by this we mean that he controls the *beginning* of a chain of causes and effects from the steering wheel to the pressure of the rudder upon the water through which the ship is (it is hoped) moving. This, however, is not quite true. The steersman himself is controlled by the movements of the ship relative to a (stationary) compass needle. The ship, in part, controls the steersman through the *information* provided by the compass. The steersman is only a part of a circular interactive system. He will do well to handle his ship with a certain humility. His control is not so complete as to justify arrogance. He is not the beginning of lineal chain of causes. (Bateson, 1970, p. 361)

The idea of control depends on the lineal punctuation, "I manipulate you," as if all the action happens in only one direction. This necessitates you being separate from me as an object to be acted upon; but I can't act upon you without us being somehow connected: "Are there any total divisions between things? Is there a place or time where one thing begins and another ends? If so then clearly there could be no causal or logical interaction between them" (Bateson, 1975, p. 148 nt.). Once there is relationship, there is system. By virtue of interacting with you, we both become part of the recursive system "you-me-you." This self-referential loop means that I never act on you per se, rather I act on the relationship;⁵ and "no part can ever have control of the whole" (Bateson, 1970, p. 362).

In an attempt to correct the individual focus of power, Beckman-Brindley and Tavormina (1978) set out to replace it with a more "dynamic, reciprocal, interactive" model (p. 423). To this end they propose a "social exchange" perspective.⁶

Social exchange theorists have discarded the search for a power holder, as well as for a stable and individual trait of power, and have looked instead at interpersonal ties of mutual dependence. This theory views interactions between persons as exchange of goods, or resources, in which each person contributes and

5 The "relationship" doesn't exist in a reified sense; it is continually created in time. Thus, I don't act on some "thing" known as "relationship," rather my actions enter a recursive process of self-reference.

6 MacKinnon and Miller (1987) also make passing reference to exchange theory as an alternative way of understanding power (p. 146).

controls the flow of some valued resources that the other desires. Since every person has some level of resources, every person also has some power in every relationship as those resources are exchanged. . . . Each person "pays" a certain price in resources brought in order to acquire certain goods as needs met. (p. 430)

The trouble with an economic metaphor such as this is that "money is always transitively valued. More money is supposedly always better than less money. For example, \$1,001 is to be preferred to \$1,000" (Bateson, 1979, p. 59). The authors attempt to move an atomistic construct into an interactional field, but they are constrained by the lineal foundation of social-exchange theory.⁷

Jay Haley (1976b) also suggests that in rescuing power from inside of people, he is paying adequate heed to the systemic field. He agrees with Bateson that:

to say that people "attempt to control" [is] not a way of describing two individuals relating to one another, but [is] putting a 'need' into them as individuals. . . . it is misleading to say that an individual has an inner need to control other people, just as I think it is naive to postulate an instinct of aggression. (p. 106)

But as Keeney (1979) points out, using a metaphor from lineal epistemology to describe relationship is inherently contradictory. He explains that:

Haley's use of the metaphor of power arises from his depiction of the notion of "hierarchy" His conception of hierarchy is in terms of a linear progression of power levels.

Auerswald (1977) suggests that the notion of hierarchy, which involves higher and lower levels, seems to be "a linguistic hangover from the Newtonian version of 'reality' ". . . . This supports Varela's (1976) contention that if one looks at a system in a linear hierarchical way, one cannot see the *whole* system. (1979, p. 123)

CONSENSUS AND DISSENSUS

Imagine two male big-horned sheep butting heads. The competitive pattern of their mirror-like interaction is an example of what Bateson would call a symmetrical relationship:

I apply the term *symmetric* to all those forms of interaction that could be described in terms of competition, rivalry, mutual emulation, and so on (i.e., those in which A's action of a given kind would stimulate B to action of the same kind, which, in turn,

7 Borrowing from the social-exchange stock of economic metaphors, one might conclude from Bateson's argument that the concept of power is bankrupt.

would stimulate A to further similar actions. And so on. (1979, pp. 212-213)

Why are they fighting? Haley (1969) would say they are engaged in a power struggle. But there is another punctuation. Their butting can be understood as a fight for *consensus* (from the Latin *cum* - together + *sentire* to feel, think) on how the relationship between them will be organized. What stops them from killing one another? If they were after power they would surely fight to the death because power is transitively valued. There is no possible calibration of something of which one always wants more. They only stop fighting when they reach consensus, when they *both agree* which animal will be dominant *in relation* to the other. They both participate in that decision and in the maintenance of what Bateson (1979, p. 213) would describe as a *complementary* relationship, i.e., an interactional sequence in which the actions of A and B mutually fit each other by virtue of their difference (e.g., dominance-submission, exhibition-spectatorship, dependence-nurturance).⁸ The animal's competitive struggle can be understood as an instance of *dissensus* (from the Latin *dis-* apart + *sentire* to feel, think), whereby they search for an answer to a relational question — which of us will be dominant and which subordinate? And indeed, the Latin root of the word "compete" suggests this idea of "seeking together": *com-* together + *petere* to aim at, go toward, try to reach, seek, etc. *Their competition is nested within the context of their cooperation.* When the relational answer is mutually discovered and accepted (in the form of their achieved consensus on the shape of their complementarity) the question dissipates (at least for the time being) and with it the symmetrical battle. Put another way, their fight can be understood as an agreement to disagree, a consensus on how their dissensus can give rise to a consensus on their consensus.

And if the answer is not accepted? A lingering dissensus, if it remains consensual, could at some point in the future give rise to another *competitive* challenge. The alternation of complementarity and symmetry is a movement in and out of consensus — it patterns the history of the relationship. But what happens when the "thinking and feeling *apart*" is not contextualized by thinking and feeling *a part* (of the relationship which connects them both)? Instead of cooperating with the defined complementarity (by assuming a subordinate position and contributing to the continuation of the relationship), an animal may sever his relationship with the victor and move on to establish his own territory.⁹

8 Complementarity in relationships operates at two different levels. Whereas I may or may not be in a complementary relationship to another person (i.e., we could be engaged in a symmetrical struggle), I am *always* complementary to the system which includes us both.

9 Note that the action of separation taken by the subordinate animal is contextualized by a more inclusive connection between both animals and the ecosystem of which they are a part. Their actions exemplify a survival not of the "fittest," but of the fit within and between species.

Dissensus can thus lead in two directions; woven into an ongoing cooperation it manifests as *competition*, a symmetrical counterpoint of complementarity. Coupled with a willingness to separate, it becomes what we might call a *dispetition*, a seeking or aiming apart, a disintegration of a relationship and the (potential) creation of new contexts.

Applied to the human domain, these distinctions can help carve a pattern-oriented description of social interaction. Consensus as to ruler and ruled is an expression of the enduring cooperation of all involved. As Haley (1976a) puts it, "hierarchy is maintained by *all* the participants" (p. 102); MacKinnon and Miller (1987) also recognize that "domination is stabilized without coercion by the subordinate's belief in the legitimacy of their subordination" (p. 151). For instance, when there is a coup d'état, the first strategic act of the rebel group is usually to take over radio and television stations and announce their victory to the people. They establish their position by convincing the populace that they are "in control." Leadership requires belief - it is a matter of consensus, not of unilateral power.

As was pointed out earlier, the symmetrical escalation of competitive dissent also requires the combined efforts of the participants. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. are cooperating in their arms race. By continuing to threaten the other with war, they each contribute to the continuation of the relationship. It is important to understand, however, that the onset of the war itself would mark an end to the competition; there would be no mutual seeking of a relational answer, but rather an attempted obliteration of the other — a most inclusive *dispetitive* undertaking.

Exploitative complementary relationships employ the threat or practice of separation to preclude an evolutionary interplay of consensus and dissensus. A man who beats his wife, a teenage girl who leaves suicide notes strewn about her parents' house, and a white dictatorship which violently enforces apartheid all share a willingness to exploit (damage) the relationships of which they are a part for their own exclusive benefit. Wielding violence and death as weapons of separation, they are able to attain differential influence over their complementary relationships. A person willing to sever a connection can always gain the consensual agreement of one who wants the connection to endure.

Extremes engender extremes; *dispetitive* solutions arise when cooperation ends, when connections dissolve; exploitative relationships invite solutions of non-attachment. A threatened person cannot be unilaterally controlled if he or she is willing to leave a context or to die. An option ventured by one who is in a vulnerable position — such as an abused woman in an unsupportive society, or a country entangled in a game of nuclear "chicken" — carries with it many attendant dangers. There are those who will say that the risks are too great and that it is unfair to suggest that the victims of oppression must act in their own interest. Dangerous and unfair indeed; but far more dangerous to wait for the other participant(s) to change.

What is the shape of a non-exploitative relationship? A systemic understanding will not be expressed in terms of an equivalence of some encapsulated quantity such as power, but rather in the interwoven pattern of consensus and dissensus unfolding throughout the history of the connected interaction. It would be more appropriate, then, to speak of the nature of contextual adaptiveness. Symmetrical escalation, which might on the surface appear as a kind of equality, can only continue until a consensual answer is reached or the shared context is breached (through death or other separations). Fixed complementarity, held in place by exploitation, is similarly a rent in the fabric of evolving relationships. Non-exploitative contexts will move in and out of consensus and dissensus, and the consensual answers arrived at – the distinctions between leaders and followers in various areas of the relationships -- will not predictably coincide with distinctions such as husband/wife, male/female, rich/poor, owner/worker, teacher/student, white/non-white, and so on.

Refusing to think and act within a power epistemology is the first step towards ecosystemic health. By focusing on metaphors of pattern rather than of embodied energy we can eschew transitive conceptions of change. And by altering our own participation in social and biological relationships we can begin, through the interplay of consensus and dissensus, to shape the unfolding of our contexts.

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