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**TOWARDS A TRANSVERSAL APPROACH TO THINKING
AND ACTING IN THE REALM OF SOCIAL WORK.
TROPES AND ATTEMPTS AT READING THE IDEA
OF AN ECOLOGICAL PERCEPTION
OF THE WORLD BY GREGORY BATESON**

INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION

The thoughts included in this text are the result of participation in the Second Bateson Symposium in Poland, which took place between 1st and 4th June 2017, in the Silesian Botanical Garden in Milkowo. However, the initial impulse came from the ideas of the ecology of mind, developed in Poland in response to Gregory Bateson's output, by Monika Jaworska-Witkowska and Lech Witkowski (Jaworska-Witkowska, Witkowski 2016; Witkowski 2014; 2014a; 2015; 2016a; 2017; Bateson, Jaworska-Witkowska 2017). It is through their scientific efforts, which develop critical ecology of mind, ideas and education, in reference to the ecology principle as seen by Gregory Bateson (1996) – cultural anthropologist, epistemologist, theoretician in the fields of communication and cybernetics – that these ideas gradually enter the discourse of pedagogy, especially social pedagogy (including social work theory), allowing us to broaden the perspective of the theoretical horizon, and to (re)construct its base of interpretation tools, deeply rooted in the humanities. The catalyst in this respect was a thesis found in Lech Witkowski's book *Niewidzialne środowisko. Pedagogika kompletna Heleny Radlińskiej jako krytyczna ekologia idei, umysłu i wychowania. O miejscu pedagogiki w przełomie dwoistości w humanistyce* by Lech Witkowski (2014), which explores the need to transform the way we think in pedagogy and pedagogy in Poland, through indicating the vision of an ecological approach to culture and social life, which is historically rooted in the development of the humanities in the 20th century.

ABOUT THE NEED FOR NEW INTERPRETATIONAL HORIZONS

Today, as never before, the pedagogical approach to educational, developmental, didactic and therapeutic impact cannot do without a significant fusion with knowledge from other sciences. This does not imply a background knowledge of pedagogical sciences or superficial terminological borrowings, nor substituting the former for the latter, but a certain relationship and interaction, particularly in areas of interest and coordination of specialist action, which cannot be limited to simple procedural solutions. This requires opening new horizons of interpretation, where the search for primary knowledge traits must be the result of practicing various scientific disciplines. Changes and determining factors have to take into account the transversal approach of processes as a principle of integration of scientific knowledge across customary divisions (Witkowski 2016a). Referring directly to social work this specific task is understood as an appeal for care, to saturate the theoretical quality of its discourse with impulses activating a new practice of thought and action, set in ostensibly distant sectors, which in reality can be integrated into a relationally deep humanistic narrative. That is why Bateson's idea of an ecological perception of the world requires one to move beyond the typical image of ecology itself, understood or associated in a reductive manner with the natural environment, which requires protection. Even a humanistic treatment of the human environment, out of concern for the protection of living conditions of individuals and societies, seems oversimplified and appears to foster a perception of ecology as a an instrumentally narrow social sub-discipline. What is meant is an understanding of ecology in terms of a specific paradigm of thought, which makes it possible to "change the approach towards the humanistic discipline itself, in the face of a new position taken by human kind with regard to culture and nature, and of the human mind with regard to ideas and values" (Jaworska-Witkowska 2016, p. 25–26). Such an interpretation of Bateson's ecology which deepens reflectiveness that brings understanding of the necessity to perceive organic links, as well as implementing system conceptualizations, can contribute – and this concerns social work as well – to seeking feedback between practitioners and theoreticians, between the realm of institutional solutions and human spirituality.

GREGORY BATESON'S ECOLOGY AS A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR SOCIAL WORK

A point of departure for this justification is the perception of social work presented in the concepts of Jean-Marie Barbier, and reinforced by the theses of Ewa Marynowicz-Hetka and German philosopher and historian Wolfgang Welsch. Their ideas seem to demonstrate that stimulating the development of a given discipline (in this case social work) does not have to occur only through tests designed for this function. While speaking out in favour of the transversal mind Welsch also warns against a single established type of procedurality and of a schematic practice of science, and calls for seeking tropes outside of the disciplinary canon or established paradigm (Welsch 1998). Transversality – understood simply as multi-referentiality – deals with the idea of integrating knowledge, and is something much deeper than pluri-disciplinarity or interdisciplinarity, which still seem insufficient for comprehending social work as reflexive practice, i.e. understood as consideration of and for action, as a system of terms and meanings which can constitute references for the cognition of action, its orientation and for seeking justification. According to Ewa Marynowicz-Hetka (2007, p. 567–568) the adoption of a transversal perspective makes it possible for scientific theory on social work to sustain itself, and also to reach out towards its own peripheries and margins, thanks to which it can come up with solutions which can question achievements, as well as stimulate the construction of other proposals. This means, according to Jean-Marie Barbier – a long time employee of the Conservatoire des Arts et des Métiers in Paris, who was responsible for a research unit oriented towards a highly specialised training of practitioners in the field of social work – that scientific analyses should reject the traditional division into research disciplines, in favour of research conducted in specified fields of activity (Barbier, 2006, p. 8). Thus, transversality means multi-aspect study of a field of interest regarded as a whole: from the outside, from the inside and above it, which also means from a certain distance, as opposed to a comfortable and disturbing attitude of a specialist, limited to one dimension coherent to a comfortable professional functioning. We have here a demand for a holistic perspective and for greater, multi-dimensional involvement of a theoretical character, which allows us to adopt – as observed by Witkowski – “a horizontal attitude between what are usually

separately treated dimensions and types of action, requiring openness to dialogue and cooperation between them, against one-sided types of disciplining action and thought” (Witkowski 2010, p. 123). In justifying this approach the author highlights “that a human being is not a set of parts which belong to one discipline only. He or she is an integrated being with various affiliations, which are not visible to those who do not deal with such relationships. The complexity of our condition requires means of indispensable sophistication, in order to cope with this very condition. We learn to perceive details. However, we do not learn to handle situations which require comprehension of new contexts, seeking new approaches, looking from a different angle. Responsibility in the systems approach requires avoiding a reductionist instrumentalization. Where the terms professionalism and rationality mean the right adopt a monotonous voice of schematic thinking, we need new quality, new precision and, sometimes, the destruction of walls surrounding the spheres of cognition” (Witkowski 2016a, 13). This can be paraphrased with a quote from André Gide: *One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time*, because “in order to see something we sometimes need to change the way we look at things, for the source of unseeing may be looking itself, and its flaw in the scope of cognitive direction of our attention” (Witkowski 2014a, p. 275). That is why it is worth referring to the ideas of Gregory Bateson’s seen from a cybernetic perspective. They constitute a basis for an ecological perception of the dimension of relations between an individual and his or her environment understood as a whole (*human being-and-environment*) and not as organism versus environment or environment independent of organism (cf. Bateson 1991, p. 171, 202). This requires adopting a new perspective of understanding the relationship between human beings and the environment, including the relationship between the environment and those who intervene within it, and who exert influence on it, in terms of feedback. Such perception of two-sided conditionings, in which we encounter environmental references and mutual interactions and feedback, draws our attention to categories which are crucial for the theory and practice of social work, and which certainly include understanding the complexity of processes concerning action and communicational situations (their problematization, difficulty, underlying relationships, dynamics of impact), taking into account traps which can emerge, and which Bateson emphasised in his postulates concerning

the concept: a) totality of communication, b) metacommunication and c) double bind (Bateson et al. 2000, p. 201–227). These will be discussed respectively further in the text.

BATESON'S CYBERNETIC THEORY (OF ECOLOGY) OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION FOR THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORK

A key motive for analyzing the practice of social work is communication space, which should be shown in all the complexities of its rules, implications, norms and traps. It is only through showing their presence that we can decide on the sense of reliable care to saturate the imagination and competence with impulses rooted in the idea of a reflective practitioner¹, which recruits another person to care for his life. However, this perspective requires significant consideration for findings in anthropology and cybernetics, according to which “communication is a matrix, in which all human action is embedded” (Maigret 2012, p. 135), and according to Gregory Bateson, all behaviour is communication (Ulleberg 2017, p. 175). According to his interpretation all human activity is communicative in character, for all individual behaviour conveys a certain meaning – all behaviour carries a message, communicates something, even yawning or sneezing. Bateson assumes that behaviour does not have its opposite, i.e. non-behaviour². In other words, one cannot not behave. While behaving we always communicate something to someone, regardless of whether it is intentional or not. Such an approach requires a different attitude towards communication, in which words or moments of silence, gestures, intonation, rate, stress, activity or lack thereof carry certain information³, which provide cues for contextual interpretation of the message, through the expression of our attitude towards the communicational situation, in a threefold sense: 1) attitude towards the receiver, 2) attitude towards the

¹ It seems that the idea of a reflective practitioner may represent what Bateson understood as a constant oscillation between ideas and practices, because care for ideas hinders practice, while striving for effectiveness in practice results in the narrowing of ideas, which practice makes use of (see Witkowski 2014a, p. 298).

² This was popularised by G. Bateson's former collaborators, i.e. P. Watzlawick, J. Bavelas and D. Jackson.

³ Lack of a message where one is expected, i.e. silence after hearing a question, is also a form of communication in the face of an expected behaviour context.

message, 3) attitude towards oneself. This means that the content of the message on the level of information is always accompanied by a relational level, i.e. an indication how a person who takes part in communication interprets the exchange, through his or her attitude towards other participants, towards the message and towards himself or herself. During communication each participant separates differences and extracts meanings in a way which is characteristic for him or her. Participants create their own cognitive maps, according to their understanding, intention and interest. However, participation in the same event does not guarantee a similar interpretation. On the contrary, the way we understand a given situation says more about us than about that situation, because it depends on our subjective interpretation, in accordance with which we shape our interactions. Interactions which shape communication occur in two essential categories: symmetrical and complementary. Both categories fulfill significant functions in communicating. Symmetrical interactions consist in reflecting a pattern in one's response – reacting with a smile to smile. A symmetry in behaviour is maintained between participants, and in the case of rivalry both parties strive for absolute victory. On the other hand, in complementary interactions specific behaviour is met with a complementary response, usually contrary to the one originally expressed – when one person dominates the other is submissive, when one speaks loudly the other speaks quietly. In a situation of conflict between parties there occurs mutual confirmation – as in the case of elevation and submission, the other intensifies and exacerbates (Bauman 2012 p. 20). Consolidation of only one type of interaction in a given relation renders it pathological. Solely systematic behaviour escalates conflict, and solely complementary interaction results in illusory harmony and lack of actual contact (Skibiński 2012, p. 84–86). It is worth noting once more the significance of the context of communication. It imposes the necessity to perform a multilateral, broad analysis of phenomena and variables, with regard to which the sense of behaviour as a form of communication is interpreted. The character of interpersonal relations, their history, their worked out patterns of communication (form, content), their resources and the individual histories of the participants, the collective history from which they stem, cultural space and place of interaction become factors, which need to be taken into account in the process of behaviour interpretation on each occasion. Significance attributed to any behaviour or event is directly determined by

context. That is why it is important for the sense of behaviour to be located through the prism of context, for only then it is possible to interpret it in terms of meaning, understanding and justification (Skibiński 2012, p. 86). This becomes important for the practice of social work, because “context determines not only the dimension of behaviour interpretation, but also the dimension of practice, i.e. patterns of action concerning an event and its participants” (Skibiński 2012, p. 86). Co-dependency, the relationship between context and meaning seldom (if at all) seems to be recognized by social workers as a mechanism which determines communication situations. However, contextual framing of the sense of behaviour constitutes a basis for its interpretation. That is why all information, which takes on a certain significance depending on a specific context requires knowledge of this context, as well as knowledge of the meta-context (as indicated by Bateson) in order to be deciphered. Each situational context is inscribed in a wider context called a meta-context, which in turn is inscribed into an even broader context. An invisible or inadequate context of behaviour may result in an incorrect reading of intentions, which constitutes one of the most important causes of mistakes in communication (Skibiński 2012, p. 87). Examples of the decisive role of context in communication among social workers (or more broadly employees of social care centres) and its involvement in the meta-context is presented in *Proszę nie pomagaj mi. Paradoks pomocy narzuconej* (see: Rurka, Hardy, Defays 2013, p. 23–24), a publication available in Poland.

Bateson’s understanding of communication implies multi-dimensionality of action and behaviour, which are at its base. Bateson created a model of communication, which assumes the form of a sequence of events, far exceeding the one in which the sender unidirectionally communicates a message to the receiver. According to him communication takes on the shape of a multi-level and multi-directional feedback mechanism. Upon considering “the issue of messages, which make certain other messages understandable by placing them in proper context” (Bateson 1996, p. 156), he highlighted a higher and more diverse form of communication, i.e. meta-communication (Bateson 1996, p. 155).

Meta-communication is usually understood, after Gregory Bateson, as the second layer of communication, or communicators to be more precise, which occur in communication enabling participants to better understand the messages. Meta-communication is usually treated

as a non-verbal supplement of verbal communication, as a distinctive indication of how to interpret a given action. According to this – with reference to the interpretation by Emanuel Kulczycki – it is implied that each message is accompanied by a meta-message, which specifies how first-order messages should be understood. This means not only specifying the content of the message, but also its overtones, and its potential influence on relations and interactions occurring between participants, which is important from the point of view of social work practice. Thus, if verbal communication harmonises with non-verbal communication, it can be assumed that the sender acts in a coherent way. However, if non-verbal communication contradicts verbal communication, it can be suspected that the sender is trying to hide something (Kulczycki 2016, p. 104–105). In such a situation we are dealing with contradiction in communication (between what one hears and what one sees or feels). This leads to what Bateson describes as the *double bind*.

The *double bind* concept, originally suggested as part of the theory of schizophrenia, can be understood – especially from a humanistic point of view – much more broadly, in terms of bilateral relations in communication, which are in danger of becoming stuck in a trap. That is because a *double bind* can be interpreted as an entanglement of the message and meta-message level, where a positive reaction of the receiver to one message is always negative to the other message. A *double bind* occurs when one person, usually with a dominating position, communicates an instruction or a message which includes two types of contradicting or logically incoherent messages, while the recipient, due to emotional reasons (fear of rejection, violence) or life situation (being in prison, hospital, or being institutionalized) is unable to end the relation. He or she is bound to the other person and must follow the instructions, but not of his or her own will (Rurka et al. 2013, p. 7, 22). In other words the recipient of the instruction or order is in a situation with no way out. On the one hand he or she feels that the instruction cannot be ignored, and on the other, he or she is unable to respond in an adequate manner⁴. The occurrence of such dependencies, which can result in reactions involved in internally

⁴ It is a situation which occurs as a result of a social imperative and is impossible to overcome. The following messages are standard examples: Be spontaneous! Be finally independent! (see Jaworska-Witkowska 2016, p. 38).

contradictory demands, can be observed among clients of aid institutions, in which expectations regarding individual activity and life independence, and demands of complete subordination to the rules of social welfare centres, or resulting from administrative or court orders, are formulated normatively. In such circumstances aid becomes coercion, an order which implicates both client (person subject to the order) and social worker (person implementing the order) in a complicated relationship game, which Bateson refers to as the *double bind*. Analyses listed by Anna Rurka, Guy Hardy and Christian Defays (2013) illustrate this problem perfectly under the operating conditions of social security. As shown by their observations and the author's own experience, it would not be a great overstatement to say that in the course of social work interventions help and coercion very often create an area, in which both these forms – though contrary – co-exist and sometimes form a unity. This is the case with using controlling aid (stigmatising, based on power and dominance) or negotiated aid (concealing or ostensibly reducing coercion)⁵, which impose certain actions on the client in order to make him or her change. In reality these actions are a trap of an internally contradictory situation of entanglement, which the client cannot stop or implement of his or her own will. Forced provision of aid, no possibility to escape, lack of ability not to respond due to threat

⁵ The following fragment can be used as an example: „A neighbour of the X family reports them for child neglect to the director of a social institution. The director commissions an background interview, the results of which confirm the concerns of the person who filed the report. The director calls the parents, tells them about his concerns, which have just emerged, and offers help. This help will be possible (at this stage of providing social security) only if they want it, which means acknowledging the fact that they have a problem. This form of help is called a social contract, i.e. „negotiated aid” because the family sign a contract concerning aid, as opposed to imposed aid. However, it is clear that if the X's do not accept this help, the director will be forced or will be given authority take their case to court. Then the court can impose the aid that they did not accept to a point when they yield. Unwillingness to accept help, which according to the will of the institution the clients might want, makes the X's situation under the law difficult. It is highly probable that their situation in the eyes of the authorities will be even more difficult, because it is additionally burdened by lack of cooperation. Therefore, according to this administrative procedure, the X's are forced to not admit to themselves that they are coerced to want to be given aid, which – according to the will of the institution – they might want” (Rurka et al. 2013, p. 31).

or order, and lack of meta-communication⁶ are inscribed in the *double bind* situation, not only for social security clients but for all participants of that relation, including the social security worker. That is why the “double bind should be understood not as a relationship between executioner and victim, but between people who became involved in a system which results in the creation of various definitions of relations, among which a conflict occurs” (Rurka et al. 2013, p. 19).

The cited theoretical thread can constitute a refreshing inspiration for the theory and practice of social work⁷, in which the quality of relations – so that it may be assumed as bringing the possibility of real, valuable change in the development of participants – must be filled with care, so that it makes a difference to the recipient – a *difference which makes difference*. In the postulate by Monika Jaworska-Witkowska (2016, p. 41) this is translated into “a difference that changes the matter”, i.e. information signifying a substantial difference, which leads to a change in perception and experience, and allows one to perceive a difference to the state of affairs. This means that a difference at the level of an act of communication should cause a reaction in the relation at an attitude level. “Communication (especially one that is characterised by contention) does not consist only in communicating difference as the basis of information, but on activating the causative potential of this difference, i.e. opening the way to a related meta-message, which bestows meaning on the very existence of this difference as a factor of significant change” (Jaworska-Witkowska 2016, p. 42). That is why it is so important to agree on the basic context of meta-communication between the sender and receiver. A client of a social service institution may receive information (message-knowledge) sent to him or her by a social worker, but may disregard them, thus not acknowledging the context which makes this information relevant. In other words: “A difference may not cause an impact, may be unimportant in reception,

⁶ During an intervention the client has no opportunity to engage in meta-communication, because of an instantaneous risk that his reaction to communication will be read as passive aggression or as an attempt to avoid help, which then seems all the more justified (Rurka et al. 2013, p. 31).

⁷ The text does not include a lot of examples of specific practical solutions, for its main purpose is to encourage reflection on the possible addition of Gregory Bateson's output in social work and to seek within this output impulses for further inspiration, use and processing.

irrelevant for the receiver to such an extent, that it is unnoticeable or at least unappreciated, for there is no context in which it would cause anything significant” (Jaworska-Witkowska 2016, p. 42). This is the case when a client (the receiver of the message) refers to information in a disdainful manner, shows no understanding of its function or does not have the context which would allow him or her to approach the reception of this information from a level other than its content, while remaining in agreement with its context. Hence even serious content, as intended by the social worker (the sender), may be received by the client as trivial or marginal, which in turn should reflexively project onto the meta-communicative gestures of the social worker if he or she can function in feedback with the client, while working on receiving the inner sense and inner significance connected with it, which reflexively exposes the former. This is one of the reasons why Monika Jaworska-Witkowska suggests that it is essential to notice the significance in “connecting the message communicated at a level of meaning (what is said) with care for the level of significance of the act of communication itself (what is this for, what is this about, why is this important for the receiver), in order to see that communicating content cannot be deprived of care for communicating a meta-communicative sense, which also has to reach the receiver if he or she is supposed to be concerned, and not merely internalize them” (Jaworska-Witkowska 2016, p. 25). It is worth noting that social work with clients which is based on coercion, a desire to convince him or her to adhere to the norms and ideas voiced by the social worker, does not have to result in convincing the client to take specific action. On the contrary –as a result of incompetent attempts at achieving something of value in the undertaken action, and bestowing upon it meaning which is shattered in the meta-communication context, it can make it more difficult, and paradoxically reverse and lead to what Erik H. Erikson calls negative identity. “A narrative which objectivises a situation without acknowledging it, without inscribing it into the horizon of subjective experiencing of one’s fate, will not help in changing an attitude, but may perpetuate it,” warned Lech Witkowski at the 19th convention of the Polish Society of Schools of Social Work (2010a, p. 138). That is why we should mention one more thought, which seems to result from the conducted analyses. What is meant is the thesis that “aid is only effective when there is a willingness to accept it on the part of the client” (Rurka et al. 2013, p. 14). Aid and coercion exclude each other to such

an extent that one is a contradiction of the other. Despite the fact that this issue deserves further study and separate consideration, it should be stressed that Gregory Bateson's output – owing to the emphasis on the danger of the double bind, in the contradictory message *let me help you*⁸, leads to following statement: “«if you want to help me, do not help me». In other words, if you do not help me, i.e. if you do not fuel your desire for me to want your help, you have opened yourself up to the possibility of providing help” (Rurka et al. 2013, p. 40).

Bateson's scientific approach, which questions previous tendencies towards a linear way of thinking, paved the way to a new interpretation of phenomena seen in terms of relational connections (Ulleberg 2017, p. 176). Despite the fact that this method once successfully changed psychotherapeutic practice, it still doesn't seem present in everyday social-education practice of representatives of aid institutions, who implement tasks within the framework of social security. Instead of a cause and effect analysis of the client's situation, one must now perceive each individual in the context of the set of relations and interactions, as part of an (eco)system. «It is crucial to emphasise that whenever one sees relations of tension between members of a particular relationship, we have to perceive this relationship as part of a broader phenomenon, which requires a completely different form from superficial conceptualisations, which situate the source in one of them» (Witkowski 2016, p. 426).

INSTEAD OF AN ENDING

The presented text should be regarded only as a signal, for there is no doubt that one can indicate (though not to criticise actions taken by social workers or their competence but to imbue their practice of thought and action with new inspiring impulses) much broader possibilities of reception

⁸ Such a message may be described as a contradictory injunction to accept aid, and although it states *let me help you* in essence it can be read as *I want you to want to allow yourself to be helped or I want you to change because I can see that you have a problem, but you have to listen to me and you also have to want to change*. In such a situation the person who concedes to other person and becomes subject to the aid processes, cannot use that aid fully, for help can be effective only when the person who needs it wants it. Thus, the injunction to accept help is contradictory (see Rurka et al., 2013, p. 22).

of Bateson's achievements, in theory and practice of social work. These, though seemingly distant and incompatible, turn out to be possible to implement, as well as indispensable to deepen the level of analyses, and the development of specific ideas and inspirations to seek impulses for further implementation and transformation.

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SUMMARY

The presented text is an invitation to reflect upon the ideas of Gregory Bateson, their signs and tropes in modern humanistic thought, as a transversal example of their implementation in the theory and practice of social work. The main justification for selecting Bateson's ecological ideas as a theoretical basis for social work are primarily the methods of analysis of this discipline, present in the concepts of Lech Witkowski, Ewa-Marynowicz-Hetka and Jean-Marie Barbier. Bateson's ecological theories, though seemingly distant and incompatible, turn out to be possible to implement in the realm of social work, as well as indispensable to deepen the level of analyses, and the development of specific ideas and inspirations to seek feedback between practitioners and theoreticians, between the sphere of institutional solutions and human spirituality. The article is an attempt at conducting an analysis of key categories for the theory and practice of social work, which include understanding the complexity of processes concerning actions and situations in communication (their problematization, difficulties, inscribed relations, dynamics of effects), taking into account traps which can emerge and which Bateson emphasized in his postulates concerning the concept: a) totality of communication, b) meta-communication and c) double bind.

Key words: social work theory, transversal approach, Gregory Bateson's communication ecology, social work communication, totality of the message, meta-communication, double bind.