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Critical Analysis of the Axiom: 'One Cannot Communicate' Theory of Paul Watzlawick of the Palo Alto School

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Abstract:

This article questions one of the axioms of Paul Watzlawick, a member of the invisible Palo Alto's School: 'One cannot communicate,' which means everything communicates. Indeed, this prompted us to ask whether any act has communicative value. The objective of this study is to enlighten the opinion of the scientific world concerning the theory above, which, unfortunately, tends to be dogmatized and popularized in the Information and Communication Sciences' village. Thus, to achieve this, we have used systemic and functionalist methods, supported by the techniques of observation, documentation, focus groups, interviews, and our sense of analysis. At the end of this reflection, we concluded that not everything communicates because communication is a matter of precision and mutual understanding. Understanding also means agreement or sharing thoughts, opinions, ideas, etc.

Keywords: Communication, Interpersonal communication

1. Introduction

It is often awkward to approach a study of theories in a given discipline given the fickle nature of the meaning of the concept 'theory' and the plurality of explanatory theories. The term 'theory' is, in fact, a chameleon-like concept in its usage. For example, according to Kerlinger (1986), 'A theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, to explain and predict phenomena' (p. p.9). Willower's (1975) definition is more parsimonious. He defined theory simply as a body of interrelated, consistent generalizations that explain phenomena (pp. 77-91).

1.1. Research Question

'Everything communicates!' It is impossible not to communicate. Isn't even the will not to communicate a communication? You have probably heard this at some point. A statement that is more than 50 years old has imposed itself on us, on everything.

Moreover, we share it, and we carry it with us. However, one might well wonder about the relevance and contours of such a totalitarian-sounding statement. In fact, what does it mean, and what does it imply to hold such statements? Can one argue the contrary? Furthermore, if 'everything communicates,' does it mean communicating and 'everything'? What if we dared to believe that there are things that do not communicate or do not communicate at all? This is as much as we raise to dare to show the strengths and weaknesses of Paul Watzlawick's statement. However, from all these questions, we can summarize our research question in these terms: does every action have a communicative value, as Paul Watzlawick claims?

As a provisional response to this concern, we believe that not all exchanges would have communicative value. However, there may be interaction in the process, and so far as it is true, the notion of meaning in all exchanges has a central value. Furthermore, this study aims to enlighten the scientific world's opinion concerning the theory mentioned above, which unfortunately tends to be dogmatized and popularized in the Information and Communication Sciences. Thus, to achieve this, we have used systemic and functionalist methods supported by observation, documentation, focus group, and interview techniques.

1.2. Context of the Study

One of the findings from that axiom stands for the impossibility for us not to communicate even when we are silent. We as humans are social beings, and communication is an ever-present interaction that is constantly happening, especially in the workplace where we are communicating our activities to others daily. That is why today, we will examine the axioms of communication and how understanding them can help us be more assertive and avoid being misunderstood (Nelson, 2020). Our body is constantly sending a message. Sometimes we can say something, and our body's behavior sends an entirely different message than we intended. One way to avoid misunderstandings is by becoming more aware of our body language. A tip for doing this is looking in the mirror and practicing our expressions.

1.3. Presentation of the Palo Alto School

The Palo Alto School is a somewhat misleading generic name for a group of researchers who worked together in the small town of Palo Alto, near San Francisco. It is misleading for two reasons: firstly, there was never a school as such. The term refers to researchers who have had common affinities in their work: clinical therapy and theories of individual communication. On the other hand, there have been not one but two groupings of researchers: Bateson and Jackson in the first instance, Watzlawick and a few others in the second. These two periods correspond to two consecutive and precise moments in research development.

1.3.1. Who is Paul Watzlawick?

Paul Watzlawick was a psychotherapist and member of the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, which he joined in 1961. He was a professor at Stanford University in California, USA. He worked with the American immigrant from England, Gregorian Bateson, and initiator of the MRI in research and therapeutic implications, a task to which Paul Watzlawick will apply himself. The invisible college (Palo Alto School) brings together anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, psychiatrists, etc. The research carried out spans several disciplines at once or is open to several (interdisciplinary). Gregory Bateson 'attempts to develop a coherent transcultural theory whose concepts could be applied to other types of society' (Edward, 1998). The study of interactions between individuals and their non-verbal dimensions is a widely addressed theme (Famous Psychologists, 2021).

Gradually, Gregory immersed himself in the study of communication. In 1942, during a conference, he discovered the principle of the systemic approach and immediately understood the interest he could derive from it. It must be said that until then, communication had been seen from the dynamic angle of forces and cause and effect relationships. Bateson now saw it as a system of messages operating in the form of loops in which the energy of the response is provided by the receiver and not by the impact of the triggering element (hence the importance of the notion of feedback). He applies the systems approach to the social sciences, particularly to communication. This approach is opposed to the linear (somewhat deterministic) conception.

In its research, it must be said that the Palo Alto School is opposed to that fashionable in Chicago. Here, Harold Lasswell is on the verge of near-infallibility thanks to his propagandist theories on communication that professes the media's irresistible power. He claims, in effect, that propaganda rhymes with democracy and that the former (propaganda) is the only way to create mass support, being more economical than violence, bribery, or other such governing techniques. This is the famous 'mass communication research' from which the paradigm of the hypodermic syringe was inspired by Pavlovian psychology (stimuli-reaction). When read behind the scenes, man would have become almost unreflective, if not completely powerless, in the face of the effects of the media, which would be very powerful. This theory is used by politicians to indoctrinate, to drop their martial ideologies. This is after the Second World War!

From the University of Colombia comes a study diminishing this Lasswellian omnipotence of the media. Lazarfield will consider that the media do not act directly on the recipients. Instead, they must often go through third parties, be more exposed to the media, and be more listened to in their groups (he discovered the importance of groups). The latter, called 'opinion leaders,' relay the messages and are perceived more effectively. This is the theory of the 'two-step flow of communication.'

Other theories will come to contradict Lasswell's theory, notably of 'uses and gratifications,' which assumes that people voluntarily expose themselves to the media to derive some satisfaction from it. Elihu Katz is its designer (Michèle, 1995).

In Palo Alto, researchers had the advantage of thinking of communication as a system for the first time and focusing attention on the receiver, the message, and the relationship resulting from the interaction between sender and receiver. This is almost a revolution in the study of communication. In the past, communication was seen as a simple transmission of messages without concern for the reaction of the other person in front or at the other end of the line.

In this systemic communication, Paul Watzlawick's contribution, which is the subject of our reflection, appears. The system of communication is based on six pillars:

- Communication is a fact, an interactional process: the emphasis is on the relationship rather than on the individual (feedback).
- Communication is not reduced to verbal messages. On the contrary, all behavior has a communicative value. This is where the famous 'everything communicates' or 'you cannot communicate' appears (Edward, 1998).
- Communication is determined by the context in which it takes place (various relationships between communicators).
- Every message has two levels of meaning: information content (feelings, experiences, etc.) and the relationship that links the interlocutors.
- The relationship between interlocutors is structured according to two main models: the symmetrical model and the complementary model (complementary relationship, equal relationship).
- Most forms of mental pathology can be traced back to disturbances and dysfunctions in communication. Hence the importance of meta-communication (a way of communicating about different aspects of communication).

It should be noted that there are two types of communication: (1) interpersonal and (2) between man and nature. Others go so far as to speak of communication between elements of nature other than man. This debate is not essential to us at the moment. We are interested in the interpersonal dimension. However, as the theme 'Does everything communicate?' obliges us, we will sometimes touch on other dimensions.

In communication, understood as transmitting messages, it is difficult to know how they are received and what the recipient thinks of them. This is the lowest level of the communication phenomenon. However, in fact, what is communication? Is it possible?

1.3.2. What Is Communication?

The word 'communication' is a catch-all term with a vast range of applications. Communication can be human, animal, plant, or mechanical as much as we talk about the process of communication for the dance of the bees in front of the jug, as much for the reaction of the barometer to atmospheric variations, and as much for the cries of a newborn baby in front of its mother, etc.

Communication is a key ingredient in many types of learning. This explains the relations between the field of learning theory and communication complexity (Nati & Adi, 2009).

The term has such a wide extension that it can be used:

- In biology (communication between cells),
- In neurology (the communication of the brain with all the other organs), in computer science (communication between computers, man, and computer),
- In linguistics (communication through speech),
- In sociology (communication within a community or society), etc.

The word 'communication' originates from the Latin noun 'communicatio,' which means sharing or imparting. From the root *communis* (common, public), it has no relation to terms such as union or unity, but rather is linked to the Latin *munus* (duty, gift), and thus has relatives in such terms as common, immune, mad, mean, meaning, municipal, mutual, and German terms such as *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Meinung* (opinion). Its root senses involve change, exchange, and goods possessed by more than one person. The Latin verb 'communicare' means to make common (John, 2008).

The term 'communication' comes - like the older terms 'communier' and 'communion' - from the Latin verb *communicare*, which means, according to the definition given by the Gaffiot: 'to put or have in common'. The etymology illustrates the polysemy of the term (which can mean, in turn, 'to have a share', 'to share', 'to participate in something', 'to be in mutual relationship, in communion with someone', 'to transmit', 'to propagate', 'to share', etc.). It explains, in a way, the meaning of the term 'communion' and explains, in a way, the different theories of communication - inspired by mathematics, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology - that follow one another and lead us from a mechanical, linear transmission to a co-construction by the participants (Sandra, 2013).

Moreover, while everyone agrees on defining it as a process, there are differing views on what that process should be. However, the first current of thought, grouped behind the 'Information and Communication Sciences,' proposes an approach to communication centered on the transmission of information between man and machine, as well as the psychic process of knowledge transmission, with the support of course of the cognitive sciences.

A second current, supported by psychology, is essentially interested in interpersonal communication (dual, triadic, group). Communication is a complex system that considers everything that happens when individuals interact and involves cognitive, affective, and unconscious processes. In this view, it is considered that the information transmitted is always multiple that the transmission of information is only one part of the communication process and those different levels of meaning circulate simultaneously.

Finally, the third current from psychoanalysis deals with intrapsychic communication. Indeed, the word 'communication' comes from the Latin 'communicare,' which means to put in common. Communication can therefore be considered as a process of pooling information and knowledge. Communication tends to swing towards an ideology. It is because today, you hear people shouting without reservation that everything is communication. Not everything has to be communicated. However, communication can be used to express life or all human activities. Communication structures and gives rhythm to human life in society.

However, if, as Watzlawick thinks, digital communication is of relatively recent origin, the fact remains that its role is essential in the history of humanity; in particular, from the moment when, thanks to the invention of writing, the great civilizations appeared. It intervenes by considerably complicating the interplay of human relations, making it even more impenetrable and unpredictable and opening it up more widely to the symbolic order, this new universe that characterizes the human species as a whole and within which things and history can take on meaning (Francis, 1998).

2. Context of the Study

When we decide to communicate, we take a risk: deceiving ourselves and being deceived. When we communicate, we rely on signs and symbols—moving things is not always easy to handle. To some extent, communication sounds like a threat, especially when meeting others (Francis, 1998).

For us, it should be remembered that the main question that concerns us in this analysis is finding out whether all human behavior is equivalent to communication. Indeed, we believe that communication is not only the exchange of messages or information in an atmosphere of interaction through words, gestures, mimics, etc. but also the aspect of understanding the very object of exchange. In other words, the object of sharing deserves to be analyzed with a critical and scientific eye. For example, we do not think that two people who insult each other are communicating. However, they are exchanging words or are in physical contact (relationship). If we say they are communicating, what are they putting together? What do they want to achieve? So many questions may follow.

On the other hand, in our opinion, the notion of communication implies a positive change in the behavior of the communicators, which is the direct result of the communication process. It should be noted that in many exchanges, behaviors can be changed. However, those that concern communication inevitably leads the inter-actors to a consensus on which the notion of understanding closely depends because, in our opinion, communication without understanding is an illusion. Indeed, suppose we affirm that all behavior has a communicative value. In that case, we run the risk of remaining in the realm of supposition and pure uncertainty because, from then on, the question arises of knowing precisely what degree of satisfaction the interactants are expecting. When individual X engages in the process of exchange with individual Y, he wants to make his interlocutor consume 100% of what he proposes and to make him espouse his point of view. According to us, human communication consists, for the human being, in opening up to the other, in reaching the very depth of his essence. It allows man to realize himself in all dimensions: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual.

3. Complexity of Communication

According to Philip, most communication research and applications of that research acknowledge the process nature of communication. However, the material following that acknowledgment confirms traditional linear and static approaches treating communication as little more than printed text (Philip, 2013). In fact, the human personality is fundamentally relational. Its nature is openness, encounter, dialogue, and relationship. For example, let us say that individual A says to individual B: 'You are a bad wizard.' As so far as he is not a wizard, the propositional content of this sentence will have a perlocutionary effect on individual B. In this case, anger will cause B to react with an insult like this one: 'If you knew that you are uglier than a baboon in the equatorial forest!' In such a verbal escalation, the hurtful words multiply, and the two individuals may even hold hands.

From the moment we say that 'everything is communication,' the question arises of analyzing the meaning (or connotation) of words whose use depends on the context. In the end, communication is almost impossible to taste. Mehl says it is impossible because there is incommunicability in every person (Roger, 1967). Communication is based on culture and values. From this point of view alone, it becomes impossible when it is not based on values. Communication can only be established on the occasion of values. In this way, Gudykunst states: Understanding communication in any culture requires general cultural information (i.e., where the culture falls on the various dimensions of cultural variability) and culture-specific information (i.e., the specific cultural constructs associated with the dimension of cultural variability) (Gudykunst, 1995). Even though we master someone's suffering, can we express it and communicate it? It is ours, very personal to be felt from the outside. How can I communicate my suffering to others? Would I be transmitting it to them as if by contagion? If only it were possible...! 'I share your suffering,' we say. Compassion, yes. However, isn't it an expression of incapacity as to its execution at the same time?

Mehl admits that suffering is a reality that cannot be shared. This thinker, a Protestant theologian by profession, does not plunge into radicalism. Nevertheless, there is a meaning to these limits of communication in the reign of ethics and the economy of sin. These limits become intelligible when we recognize the fallibility of the perfectible human being. This perfection, which is only a gift from God, will be restored between himself and men and men among themselves. Communication, for him, is, therefore, a gift from God. Man does not know how to communicate, but God alone.

We have just understood that communication, far from being summed up in God alone, as Roger (Roger, 1967) sees it, is difficult, sometimes impossible. It can, however, be approached or even achieved (not in a totalizing totality). It happens, but not often. We spend more time putting our opinions, our feelings, our experience, our seniority, our qualifications, and our power above those of others. Ultimately, we place ourselves as a strong 'I,' worthy of being listened to... in front of a neglected, puny or insignificant 'you'. However, let us be reassured that 'the relationship of possession (or domination or even indifference) kills communication'.

If we say that everything is communication, how can we analyze the notion of meaning (connotation) which is the domain of contextualization of a fact? Communication is complex. Its field is so vast that the consensus on the definition of its discourses is practically difficult. Nevertheless, it is clear from the above that communication is fundamental. Moreover, it defines humanity: we are more human. The more we communicate, the more our capacity to communicate, to enter into communion (not necessarily to agree!) with others.

As we said earlier, communication only happens through language, through expression. Moreover, to express oneself is to say verbally, in writing, by gesture, images, speech, or the arts what one feels deep inside. Communication is the process of expressing oneself, what presents itself to oneself, to another (third party) to obtain a particular reaction, approval, or establish a relationship. Furthermore, the best form of communication is dialogue. Here everyone is more or less on an equal footing. Real, good communication does not manipulate. It is not propaganda. For who espouses propaganda reduces his interlocutor or recipient to a passive subject, devoid of the power to react and choose.

To communicate, we use the tools we have just listed above (writing, gesture, images, art, words) or even more. Man wields these tools. It is the one who communicates it. Therefore, we do not think that the declaration of the pastor in the middle of the nuptial ceremony stipulating: '...these two young people are no longer two but today become one flesh' would be qualified as an unrealistic declarative act if they had already known each other sexually during the pre-nuptial period. For these, they are already unlawfully one.

In Paul Watzlawick's 'everything communicates', there is this dose of the unknown, of a shocking and pretentious overstatement that we ask ourselves: 'What communicates? If everything communicates at once'. Everything communicates what to whom? And how? We cannot know the recipient, the code, the context, etc., precisely. We would get stuck in interpretations, in the rough and tumble. With all the dangers of making mistakes, especially since the person who is 'communicating' does not share the same culture as us (think of Roger MEHL: culture as the basis of communication),

does not share the same language, the same code, the same reference system. Moreover, the one who communicates can neither rectify nor modify his communication if he is not human.

4. Illustration of the Theory under Review

Let us note that even among men, the task is never easy. For example, one of our contributors wondered, 'A half-empty bottle of soda found in a theatre on a bench, what does it communicate?' He did it in an exchange about the same discussion, trying to dig deep into whether Paul was right in asserting that 'everything communicates.' At this point, one can only speculate:

- Its owner is not orderly;
- Its owner does not respect the environment;
- Its owner has forgotten it;
- He is not far away;
- He got bored and could not empty it;
- It is trapped;
- He went out in a hurry, sick;
- He is out, kicked out of the room, etc.

In short, everything is possible. However, of course, not everything is possible as the hypotheses increase. At least one thing is sure: the half-empty soda bottle, on a bench, in a theatre. We may not know much. This bottle has not communicated, and the person who left it has not finished communicating either. However, at least we have an idea of who he is: disorderly, reckless, disrespectful of the environment and property, etc., but that is not enough. Even if we were to take DNA from the bottle to identify the person, and even then, everything would be clear only if we saw the person if he answered some questions about his intentions, his motives, etc.

The Palo Alto School says that 'you cannot communicate.' So everything communicates. Even the intention not to do so is communication. This statement shocked us from the first time we thought about concepts and their implications in life, particularly in communication, our privileged field of research.

It is true that when one is silent instead of answering, or when one is waiting for an answer, one is worried and one is disturbed. Lazily, we like to apply the principle of 'who does not say a word consents.' Probably, it is to dissuade the silent one. However, it is violent and lazy at the same time to draw such a conclusion! Why can't we say that he who does not say a word thinks?

Moreover, if it is a question of applying the death penalty to someone, we would have killed someone who might not have been at fault. It would be more criminal than the crime that was repressed beforehand. The critical and discerning mind wants us to dig, to search from top to bottom to find out what is going on behind the silent mouth. Developed and scientific justice even uses scientific, medical, mental tests, etc., to avoid drawing such a conclusion. From the point of view of communication, those who remain silent undermine themselves. It opens the door to speculation. It is better to respond, even if people will take the easy and cheapest route: rumor. As we saw on 20 February 2013, the Italian press claimed to have found the real causes of Benedict XVI's resignation. To the total surprise after reading the dispatches and comments, the editorial offices shone with hypothetical allegations (conditional almost everywhere!) about priests and bishops close to gay circles. The Vatican, which did not want to comment on this 'news,' said that it was false, 'speculation.' If it did not react, in this world in search of sensationalism and buzz, imagine the danger and damage that would result, etc.; in short, the policy of the spiral of silence is not very good in managing sensitive situations.

The same goes for gestures, mimics, and other communicative artifacts, which are very important for inter-comprehension. However, when they are not placed in a frame of reference to all the communication actors, one arrives at distortions at incompleteness. Bouliet rightly notes that 'all human acts, even those that appear to be the most self-serving, are always full of ambiguity' (Michel, 1985).

In any case, as we pointed out above, the notion of meaning is crucial in communication since everything we say in a given community only finds meaning in a very specific context where the actors involved share the same code as Smith conceived it. For him, the process of connecting people makes meaning and understanding the focus of the effort of communication (Donald, 1992). The most striking example is the tower of Babel, where the work of building the tower could not continue because it had become difficult to understand each other at a certain level. However, before God confused it with several languages, there was communication, thus understanding (Moise, 2021).

5. Key Findings

After a long period of discussion, observations, and readings, here is what this study has discovered:

- The expression 'who doesn't say a word consents' is not always accurate because someone can decide voluntarily or not to react to a statement or an event;
- Not everything communicates- Communication exists only when there is an understanding of the subject shared between the interlocutors;
- Human communication remains a field of precision so that each one knows exactly what he must do concerning the message he has received from his interlocutor;
- Not every interaction or exchange is a communication- Communication is a process aiming to lead to the creation of understanding between the interlocutors;

- Communication very often refers to the notion of understanding the facts since we say that we have communicated with such and such a person if and only if he or she displays behaviors motivated by our verbal or non-verbal message to him or her;
- Communication only makes sense in a specific context;
- There is communication only if the code used in the exchange process is shared and understood perfectly by all the actors involved.

6. Conclusion

We have now come to the end of our reflection on one of Paul Watzlawick's five axioms, 'You cannot communicate'. The question that preoccupied us in this analysis was to know whether any behavior can necessarily have a communicative value. To do this, we used systemic and functionalist methods with the support of observation, documentary, focus group, spontaneous interview, and personal reflection techniques. Not everything is communication. Communication is more vast and complex. It encompasses many parameters, tricks, and artifacts. We must know how to use them to enter into contact and relationship in a profitable way for ourselves and the other.

This reflection does not intend to cover all aspects of this theory. However, other researchers on the subject will be able to complete and clarify the aspects less well-explored by the present reflection to promote science.

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