The “double bind” discourse in management narratives: a transdisciplinary approach.


Carlos Jesús Fernández Rodríguez. Doctor in Sociology.
Daniel Ondé Pérez. Psychologist.
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM), Spain.

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Abstract: Discourses and narratives in organizations have become increasingly important. The publishing industry produces thousands of books on business and management each year, and some of them even become best-sellers. According to Boltanski and Chiappello, these texts are the main loci in which the new spirit of capitalism is inscribed. This paper aims to grasp these discourses via a transdisciplinary approach, focusing on one concrete problem: double bind messages, which appear constantly throughout these discursive manifestations. Double bind theory (formulated by, amongst others, Gregory Bateson) is about relationships and what happens when important basic relationships are subjected to chronic invalidation through paradoxical communication. These paradoxes are often present in the new “liberatory” management preached by consultants and HRM experts. We believe that it is necessary to combine different disciplines to study a social phenomenon which has not just a sociological, but also a psychological impact. This paper examines managerial double bind messages combining sociology of organizations, psychology and discourse analysis, and reflecting on the importance of interdisciplinarity in facing complex questions in which interactional communication is a key factor.

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play the game, of not seeing I see the game.

Ronald D. Laing (1972)

Introduction: management narratives.

Our contribution to this panel called “At the frontiers of transdisciplinarity: into the transsociological” is an analysis of a singular phenomenon: double bind discourses in management narratives. It is not an obvious sociological fact: it is not easily identified as such. In the first place, we are speaking about discourses, whose research field is closer to linguistics, semiotics or a proper discourse analysis. Secondly, we are speaking about double binds: the theory of double bind (formulated by Bateson, among others), as we will explain afterwards, has probably more to do with psychology and Logic than with pure sociology. Thus, why do we try to approach both aspects from a sociological perspective? Our argument is that these specific discursive manifestations are underlying a specific social situation, whereas they also have effects on the individuals in both social and psychological aspects. But before developing this interdisciplinary approach to social reality, we would like to describe, in the first place, what management narratives are.

Therefore, we will draw our attention in the first place to management discourse. We conceive discourse not just as language, but as other forms of semiosis such as visual images or body gestures, following the conception that authors such as Teun A. van Dijk or Norman Fairclough develop with their Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. see van Dijk, 2003; Fairclough, 2003; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Wodak and Meyer, 2003; Chiappello and Fairclough, 2002). The management discourse is basically a discourse about reaching efficiency and effectiveness, and the best allocation of resources possible. It is a discourse from the enterprise, related to the best way of managing resources in an organization. Whilst management in organizations has always been a key factor in capitalism, during the twentieth century these discourses have been central, due to the expansion of the markets and the

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2 We would like to thank our friend Tim Appleton for his comments on this paper.
growth of the enterprise size to fit them. The traditional firm grows and turns into a structure with hierarchical positions and increasing specialization (see Chandler, 1977). It is the managerial revolution which, along with the new scientific management and keynesianism, will help to build a new order: organized capitalism. Intertwined with this managerial revolution, some specific discourses about management come to the fore.

Discourses and narratives in organizations started to achieve greater influence in the Post-World War period, but since the eighties they have become increasingly important. This is due to another shift, the transition from an organized to a disorganized capitalism which took place during the late sixties and seventies from an industrial economy to one which is more services-oriented one (about these questions see Piore and Sabel, 1984; Offe, 1985; Lash and Urry, 1987 and 1993; Harvey, 1989; Alonso, 1999 and 2001; Castells, 2000). The new discourse of capitalism has focused on different concepts: networks, entrepreneurship, risk, flexibility, etc. The ideologic manifestations of capitalism have been reinforced since the collapse of the communist bloc and the interest in management has increased since then. One of the most notorious examples of these discourses are the management books that we can easily find at every book shop or airport under the label “business” or “management”.

Authors like Peter Drucker (2001), Tom Peters (1992) or Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2001) have even achieved the category of “gurus”, and their lessons are learned by every manager wanabee. Nowadays, the publishing industry produces thousands of books on business and management each year, and some of them even become best-sellers (on this phenomenon, see Huczynski, 1993; Micklewaith and Woolridge, 1996; Collins, 2000). According to sociologists Boltanski and Chiappello, these texts are the main loci in which the new spirit of capitalism is inscribed (1999).

This paper aims to grasp these management narratives via a transdisciplinary approach, focusing on one concrete problem: double bind messages, which appear constantly throughout these discursive manifestations. But let us first explain what a double bind actually is.

**The double bind theory: basic principles.**

Double bind theory is about relationships and what happens when important basic relationships are subjected to chronic invalidation through paradoxical communication. It was formulated, among others, by Gregory Bateson in his work *Steps to an ecology of mind*. In a strict sense, Bateson’s double bind theory is grounded on a theory of communication, based on Bertrand Russell’s Theory of Logical Types (Whitehead and Russell, 1919). The central aspect of this theory is that there is a discontinuity between a class and its members. As Bateson explains it, the class cannot be a member of itself nor can one of the members be the class, since the term used for the class is of a different level of abstraction (a different Logical Type) from terms used for members (Bateson, 1973: 174; also in Ruesch and Bateson, 1968: 194-196).

In both the fields of formal logic and of mathematical abstraction, this discontinuity does not signify any problem: in fact, there is an attempt to establish a kinship between the members of a class, which permits both the definition of that class and its classification. But in the context of human communication, this discontinuity between Logical Types or different ways of

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3 5,000 different books a year are published just in the British market, according to Collins (2000)
4 In this paper we will discuss specifically the theory that Bateson develops in two sections of the book: “Towards a theory of schizophrenia” and, in a much lesser extent, “Double bind, 1969” (both in Bateson, 1973).
communicating is much more complex. There are no logical rules which can allow us to identify that discontinuity. The experience that we have of human communication cannot be reduced to a group of messages which are true and another group of messages which are false.

The messages we send through language are part of different logical types, that is, they have different communicative functions, different levels of abstraction. However, what happens when that discontinuity is not perceived as such by the individual? An easy example of this situation is humour, especially jokes. It is frequent that an individual who is living in a foreign country with a different culture has problems understanding the meaning of the jokes of the locals. That is even clearer in the case of the individual who is still learning the foreign language. And even in the case that he gets a translation of the joke in his mother tongue, he will still have problems of understanding (except in the case of a translation which is aware of postures, gestures and facial expressions, or a translation made by someone with the same background as this individual).

In humour we are playing constantly with language, and also with ways of representing reality. We use sequences of already-known words, but expressed through figures which, even if they represent people, situations or moments, they are used in very different ways (non-frequent, or even inconvenient). The content of a joke can rely on literal messages, which belong to a certain Logical Types or ways of communicating. But their goal is not a literal transmission of information. From this point, the explosive moment in humour comes from a re-evaluation of earlier signals used for the joke, which are ascribed to a different Logical Type. Thus, this re-evaluation supposes a labelling of the mode, attributing modality to those signals. Therefore, this would mean a transition from a (for instance) normative communication to something different, such as a fantasy, a metaphor, a metonymy, or even a vulgar comment.

This idea is not easily captured. The core idea of the Theory of Logical Types is that no class can be a member of itself. In other words, that a name is not the named thing. In this sense, any message or representation which identifies the name with the named thing would constitute an error in the assignation of Logical Types. The earlier example of the foreign citizen and the local joke would be a paradigmatic case: the foreign person who does not have a good knowledge of the local language would probably capture the situations, dialogues and characters in the joke in a literal way, not finding them funny, but absurd (we are supposing that the joke is funny, indeed). He will not experience the explosive moment in the humour, as he is not able to set the comical scene in a different Logical Type, that is, at a different level of abstraction in which the joke acquires a meaning. In Bateson’s argument, this error of classifying the name together with the named thing is equivalent to eating the menu instead of the dinner (Bateson, 1973). It is clear that, among human beings, the mode identifiers or Logical Types can be falsified. Thus, we have the artificial laugh, the manipulative stimulation of friendliness, the confidence trick, kidding and the like.

This type of situation show that, in communication, the Logical Types which define a series of messages are themselves, at the same time, members or “messages” of other Logical Types, at a different level of abstraction. There is where the moment of complexity comes from.

Therefore, this theory deals with very abstract questions as conceived in the field of logic. In logic, when we can argue that a set of propositions is leading to a paradox, the structure of the axioms and theories that are involved in the embodiment of that paradox is refused.

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We are thinking of our good friend Tim Appleton.
Nevertheless, in the real world (or in our representation of the real world) time is always present, and nothing which has ever existed can be totally refused in the same way as in logics. Therefore, in both interpersonal relationships and communication spheres there is a coexistence of paradox and the impossibility of a total denial of messages, in a kind of historicity. To understand this, we have to be aware that Bateson wrote this argument in a moment where the first developments of cibernetics were becoming highly influential. It was understood by that time that computers would never face real paradoxes, but simulations of paradoxes in sequences of temporary cause-effects.

However, we do not want to go deeper into these arguments, as our intention was to show the important differences between the world of logics and the world of phenomena. What would be then the formal conditions which differentiate both worlds?

1. Firstly (and we are going to talk about key concepts in double bind situations and psychotic communication), it is necessary to understand that communication is not just conducted through messages, but also by people.

2. People interact with each other, and not just through messages. Behind each person interacting with others there is a “play” of intentions, with different degrees of consciousness.

3. While human beings interact with other human beings, they are also learning to communicate and to establish relations with others. We learn to adapt ourselves to new situations and re-adapt ourselves to past situations which involved some type of conflict. Human beings may also become more skilled in learning, through being exposed to several situations or contexts. In other words, they may learn to learn. This process is at the base of habits: human beings generalize thoughts and behaviours through their schemes of information processing. That is, we generate thinking habits and habits of behaviour in order to reduce our energy consumption. No situation is completely new for us in terms of representation, even if it may be new in terms of our experience or memories.

4. Causality is circular instead of linear. As we include the factor Time in the messages, the classic linear causality “If... Then...” cannot be applied. Among human beings messages and the relationships between them achieve an extraordinary level of complexity. It is not possible to assume that there is an “originary” message which set in motion all the following messages: this can only be conceived in the field of abstract logic. It is possible to say the same about people’s “play” of intentions: any sequence of behaviour or thoughts has a beginning and an end only from a formal logical perspective, but not from a human perspective. Thus, in this sense there is not a message that can be wholly denied. In the terrain of human relations there are only individual conceptions of the nature of the relationship, that is, there is not an objective reality.

5. Temporality and intentionality in communication raise the issue of the necessity of metacommunication. An important group of messages must be metacommunicative. Watzlawick points out that only a small part of human communication can be considered useful for an information exchange, whereas the rest is mainly an endless process of definition, confirmation, rejection and re-definition of the nature of our relationships with others.

6. Finally, everything we have said makes sense when we use the concept of System. Departing from a circular causality which relies on an eternal interaction process, we understand communication as a system in which everyone is influenced by everyone, whereas every person influences the others. Here we depart from a principle of autorregulation or homeostasis. As Don D. Jackson argues, a human being is not just an isolated element which moves successively from his intra-psychic processes to his more developed cultural aspects. There is a continuous influence between the members of a
7. system (the family is a prototypical case, as we will argue later), and any change to any member of the system has an impact on the rest of the members (Bateson, 1981).

A psychotic communication?

Bateson and several of his colleagues (Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley and John Weakland) developed their investigations into the study of schizophrenia for some time (Bateson, 1981). From 1952 onwards, they were collecting data from the systematic observation of families in which one member had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. The data analysis led to a consensus between them regarding the general aspects of a communicative theory as to the origins and nature of schizophrenia. These authors considered that this discontinuity between different levels of abstraction raised in the Theory of the Logical Types is something that several individuals are not able to differentiate (?), and this situation can be considered a communicative pathology. They focused especially on the communicative pattern established between a mother and her child as the main source of double messages or double-bind messages. It is in the nucleus of the family interaction that they searched for sequential patterns from which the patient acquires the habits exemplified in a schizophrenic communication. That is, the patient has to live in an universe where the sequences of events are such that his out-of-joint communicative habits are adequate in a certain way. These type of sequences, produced in the inner experience of the patient when he is a child, would be responsible for the inner conflicts in the assignation of Logical Types. These unresolved sequences of experience are denominated “double bind”.

It seems logical that most of the developments from this pathological conception of communication are related to the therapeutic treatment of schizophrenics and with the analysis of interaction between members of a family. The phrase “double bind” expresses the idea that the “victim” of these types of situations (which imply unresolved sequences of experience), whatever he does, cannot ever “win”, that is, he cannot get out of the situation, or escape from it. Bateson identifies some necessary ingredients for a double bind situation:
1. Two or more persons, one of which can be designated as “the victim” (the one who suffers the effects of the double bind).
2. A repeated experience, which finally comes to be an habitual expectation (for the victim, obviously).
3. A primary negative injunction, which may have either two forms. The first one may be described as: “Do not do so and so, or I will punish you”. The second one would be: “If you do not do so and so, I will punish you”. Bateson selected a context of learning based on avoidance of punishment rather than a context of reward seeking.
4. A secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, and like the first enforced by punishments or signals which threaten survival. It includes a wide variety of forms: for example, “do not see this as a punishment”, “do not see me as the punishing agent”, or “Do not submit to my prohibitions”.
5. A tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping from the field.
6. Finally, this set of ingredients is no longer necessary when the victim has learned to perceive his universe in double bind patterns (Bateson, 1973: 178-179).

This situation is easily recognized in certain close interpersonal relations between people, such as the ones inside a family with very close ties (Bateson, 1973; Selvini et al., 1978). What is the effect of this peculiar situation? Bateson’s hypothesis is that whenever a double bind situation occurs, there will be a breakdown in any individual’s ability to discriminate between Logical Types. This situation has the following characteristics:
1. When the individual is involved in an intense relationship; that is, a relationship in which he feels it is vitally important that he discriminates accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he may respond appropriately.

2. The individual, then, is caught up in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one of these contradicts the other.

3. The individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed that he might correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond to. Thus, he cannot make a communicative statement (Bateson, 1973: 180).

This argument has been especially productive in the field of family therapy, being applied not just to the work with people diagnosed as schizophrenics, but also in cases of alcoholism, anorexia, marital conflicts, divorces, psychotic behaviours, and the like. It starts in the fifties with authors such as Bateson, Haley, Weakland, Birdwhistell, Goffman, Jackson and Hall, whose innovative work meant breaking with the mainstream and dominant tendencies in psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis. This first generation of researchers from the so-called Palo Alto’s “Invisible University” in the USA, was followed by other authors such as Scheflen, Watzlawick and Bowen (among others) who, in the sixties, used and developed the hypothesis of their predecessors. The first generation built the basic foundations of what would be called later the systemic focus on therapy, which included not only the patients in the therapeutic work, but also the family (Bateson, 1981).

In the seventies the School of Milan was created, with Mara Selvini as main representative. This School is influenced by the trend of systemic thinking and by the new conceptions of cibernetics and communications. Selvini speaks about “false consciousness” in order to refer to these situations in family relations in which one member of the family (or several) says or does something when he really wants to say or do something different. The ways in which a psychotic character communicates are shaped from these “non-desired” messages. It is extremely difficult, at least from the point of view of family dynamics, to discriminate accurately between the intention of the person transmitting and the content and information of the message, basically because the individual is not conscious of that dynamic. According to Selvini (1995: 252), the members of the family put into practice winning strategies which seem really carefully prepared. However, they do not truly know them. This is important because through the use of games it can be observed how often human beings lie to themselves in therapeutic sessions. This is, probably, the most common phenomenon in family games. The true object is hidden behind false messages, so the person is not able to look beyond the latter, which then become true in the experience of communication. Here we are talking about true or false in the sense of what the person concerned does to the other members of the family: that is, the way he represents them, and the games of intentions and strategies conceived around them. In fact, the real or true object is the one directly connected to the need of the subject; if he would follow that true object, the situation would conclude in a satisfying experience for the subject. The adjective false is refered here to certain elements of communication which are “hiding” the needs or desires of the subject; if they are followed, they will not conclude in a satisfactory experience for the subject, but in a experience of psychotic character. In fact, this “hiding” function is one of the existing Logical Types in communication: it is at a different level of abstraction from lies, manipulation or other conscious alterations of truth and intentions that lie behind a given message. In

6 Selvini et al. (1978: 31) focus on certain games in a couple: each one endeavors to provoke his/her partner with series of tactics without any conclusion. Examples would be combinations like these: depression and exhaustion (“I feel worn out, unloved: do something to liven up the game”), boredom and an air of being faraway (“Do you think you can reach me? I am somewhere else”) and others, all in a “Now you win, now you don’t” tactics.
communication (using Bateson’s expression) the validity of information depends on the belief.

Another breaking point in the conception of the psychotic character of interpersonal relations and communication is the work of Ronald D. Laing and its “anti-psychiatry”. Laing raises one point that is highly relevant to what we are describing here: the paradoxical situation which takes place between a therapist (usually a psychiatrist) and a patient with schizophrenic symptoms. He departs from a model of the subject which gives priority to the analysis of pathological behaviour through the classification of symptoms: one of the key factors in the diagnosis of schizophrenia is the symptom of the representation of people as if they were objects (Laing, 1964, 1965). Laing says that the psychiatrist bases his diagnosis upon his appreciation that the patient is someone who lives his relationships with the others “as if they were objects instead of people”. And, paradoxically, this displacement is exactly the same the psychiatrist does, as his approach, instead of understanding the patient as a unique individual, is derived from an excessive generalization of the symptom. This means that the patient is being classified using the same function which is considered the symptom. It is like that expression: eating the menu instead of the dinner. This way of operating is paradoxical. In Bateson’s terms, the patient is diagnosed as schizophrenic according to a pathological classification, based on symptoms. One of these symptoms is the difficulty the patient has to make a correct asignation of Logical Types in their relationships to others. From this symptom (and from others, indeed) the subject-patient is labelled as schizophrenic, which implies at the same time an error in the assignation of Logical Types, as the therapeut is confusing the pathological category with the pathological behaviour.

Ronald D. Laing (1964) used the expression “divided self” to reflect the conflicts that some people live in situations, contexts or relations of a psychotic type. This type of conflict occurs between the perceptions the subject has regarding what is happening around him (and the intentionality of both the person transmitting and the message), and the perceptions that the others have about him and his intentions. A “divided” person is someone who suffers a permanent state of conflict which arises between his own self, the inner, and the social world in which he lives, the outer.

In our opinion, all these terms - double bind, false consciousness and divided self - whilst different, share some points in common: all of them essentially raise the idea that interpersonal relations depart from a psychotic ground. Those relationships always go beyond people’s own intrapsychical activity, so it is neccessary to approach the experience of the other from their contextual reality. We will not be able to understand psychotic behaviour if we do not analyse the subject as a member of a system. Past a certain point, in none of these three theories does the subject have a chance to escape or break away from the situation. Moreover, the three terms mentioned have several functions: a) all of them are grounded on strong epistemological principles, regarding the human subject; b) rather than theories, they are working hypotheses which provide us with a multidimensional analysis of the complexity of human systems; and c) they formally define, at the same time, a certain type of situation and social context. They are really helpful to describe something that we consider extremely important: the psychotic experience of the social and the consequences this experience has for its subjects.

Following all these arguments, we will try to make an interpretation of this managerial literature using “double bind theory” as a working hypothesis. Psychosis and also schizophrenia are used as metaphors in our analysis of managerial discourses. We hope that the readers are able to distinguish clearly between the way of analysing interpersonal relations and the therapeutic applications developed by certain schools and authors, without forgetting
the extreme consequences psychotic experiences have for some people. Thus we assume the psychotic nature of human communication, although this does not (necessarily) imply that everybody is suffering from a pathology. *We do want to eat the dinner, not the menu!* The same happens with the term family: even if we think that there are similarities between the family system and the enterprise system, we are not talking here about an identification between both of them. This is not about finding the father figure among our bosses, nor finding our brothers or cousins among our colleagues at work. Our work environment is a very important aspect of our daily experience, but it is not as influential as the family in which we develop: it is not the motor or genesis of personality (or subjectivity).

**Enterprise culture and family: possible effects of the double bind in organizations.**

As we mentioned earlier, Bateson explained in his work the effect of double bind in family bonds. He had hypothesized that the family situation of the schizophrenic had the following general characteristics:

1. A child whose mother becomes anxious and withdraws if the child responds to her as a loving mother.
2. A mother to whom feelings of anxiety and hostility towards the child are not acceptable, and whose way of denying them is to express overt loving behaviour to persuade the child to respond to her as a loving mother and to withdraw from him if he does not.
3. The absence of anyone in the family, such as a strong and insightful father, who can intervene in the relationship between the mother and child and support the child in the face of the contradictions involved.

Given this situation, the mother will be simultaneously expressing at least two orders of message. These orders can be roughly characterized as:

1. Hostile or withdrawing behaviour which is aroused whenever the child approaches her;
2. Simulated loving or approaching behaviour which is aroused when the child responds to her hostile and withdrawing behaviour, as a way of denying that she is withdrawing (Bateson, 1973: 184).

The mother uses the child’s responses in order to affirm that her behaviour is loving, and since the loving behaviour is simulated, the child is placed in a position where he must not accurately interpret her position if he is to maintain his relationship with her. In other words, he must not discriminate accurately between orders of message, in this case the difference between the expression of simulated feelings (one Logical Type) and real feelings (another Logical Type) (Bateson, 1973: 185).

Watzlawick says that, even in the best circumstances, it is a hard task for the ego to obtain a relationship with the other that can be both enrichful and satisfactory. In human relations it is usually possible to achieve a “practical consensus” through metacommunicative processes such as negotiation, rectification or re-negotiation. In psychotic or damaged relations, the attempts to negotiate are sometimes so rude and incompetent that none of the participants can achieve an agreement. This situation moves towards what Wynne et al. (Wynne et al., 1958) have called pseudo-mutuality, that is, a compromise solution which implies a characteristic dilemma: “Divergence is perceived as if it would lead to the breaking of the relationship, and consequently it must be avoided; but if the divergence is avoided, the growth in the relationship is impossible” (quoted by Watzlawick in Bateson, 1981: 252).

Watzlawick classifies the psychotic modes of communication in three big groups. He reminds us that there are not huge qualitative differences between these and the normal modes of communication. “As in other aspects of psychopathology, frontiers are fluid” (Bateson, 1981).
They are: tangentialization and disqualification, mystification and paradox. We think that these last two are closely related to managerial literature, mystification being easily legible in political discourses.

Tangentialization and disqualification represent that situation in which one person recognizes another person’s will to communicate but overlooks the content or information of the messages. One example is when a child complains to her mother “You treat me like a child” and the mother answers “But you are my child”. The word ‘child’ is used by the son in the sense of a relative age, whereas the mother uses it in the sense of a kinship relation. Disqualification would be the mechanism through which the answer, given in a tangential way, disqualifies or displaces the initial message, prevailing over the content of those answers.

Mystification is not a divergence which appears between an affirmation and its answer, but between one’s declaration and the other’s perceptions, intentions and feelings. This term was borrowed by Laing from Marx’s writings, in which he points out a particular aspect of the relation between the working class and the ruling class. As the forms of exploitation are disguised under the appearance of benevolence, the exploiters deceive the exploited and make them feel solidarity with their exploiters, who are recognized only by their exploitation, and also to experience rebellion as madness or felony (Laing, 1965).

In its more abstract form, a mystified communication can be enunciated as: “What you are seeing (or thinking, or listening to, or feeling) is false. I will tell you how things really are (or how you must listen to, or think, or feel)”. These type of messages, if the situation happens frequently, can put the receiver in an untenable situation (using another expression from Laing). If the receiver is not able (or it is forbidden to him) to de-mystify the situation through metacommunicating his purpose, he falls in the trap and cannot win. This mechanism is very similar to what generates situations of “false consciousness”, as the subject-victim has to deny his own perceptions. He has to deceive himself in order to trust those people or messages that are making him have doubts. Laing observes that “the mystified person is by definition wrong, but maybe he cannot feel he is wrong” (Laing, 1965).

A paradox is a message which involves its own contradiction. A classic example of paradox is offered by this affirmation (quoted in Ruesch and Bateson, 1968: 222): “I am lying”, which means “I lie, so I lie when I say I lie”. We are caught in a paradox because he makes a statement, and he makes a statement about this statement, the second being of a different order of abstraction from the first. When these paradoxical messages are received from a given authority as orders which must be carried out, the receiver cannot obey these orders but must disobey them. In this case, they are simply messages that, through a logic prism, seem deceptive, but in human communication look both absurd and real at the same time.

In Watzlawick’s words, from the presentation of these structures of psychotic communication we can reach the conclusion that all these structures are one-way roads, with one member of the relationship damaging the mental equilibrium of the other (in Bateson, 1981). We think that these one-way roads are not only produced when the child is in an untenable situation in his relation to his parents. These type of situations are also visible in other contexts through modes of communication or Logical Types - sometimes in a similar way, sometimes in a different way.

Thus, a double bind is an intense situation in which we have to respond appropriately; we find two different kind of messages and we face the problem of responding. Let us focus on the first two assertions. Is it possible to find, in social life, situations in which we to respond to
contradictory orders? It is possible to find them in certain institutions outside the family, institutions characterized by being closed to the external world. That is the case of total institutions such as the ones studied by Erving Goffman in his classic work *Asylums*. He explained that inmates in asylums tend, in some ways at least, to feel inferior, weak, blameworthy and guilty (Goffman, 1991: 18). But sometimes we do not have to research in such a specific place. We have found this situation in certain discourses in a very specific place: the organization. We will now give a few examples on this.

**Managerial paradoxes: examples of double binds in management discourses.**

Where is the sociological aspect in double bind theory? It is in the way certain social institutions involve people in situations of double bind. As we have said, there is a clear example in organizations such as firms - enterprises operating in a market. The subject matter of the theory of the double bind is, according to Bateson, a weaving of contexts and of messages which propose context (whose meaning comes only by virtue of context). And the context is in fact defined by the social (Bateson, 1973: 246). Bateson also indicates that: “We have suggested that this is the sort of situation which occurs between the preschizophrenic and his mother, but it also occurs in normal relationships. When a person is caught in a double bind situation, he will respond defensively in a manner similar to the schizophrenic. An individual will take a metaphorical statement literally when he is in a situation where he must respond, where he is faced with contradictory messages, and when he is unable to comment upon his contradictions” (Bateson, 1973: 180).

But these paradoxical messages are quite normal in the management narratives we talked about earlier in this paper. They are often present in the new “liberatory” management preached by consultants and HRM experts. We will give some examples of them.

The management discourses during the Taylorist era focused on rationality, hierarchies, measuring and a “one-best-way” to work things out. Since the transition to a more service-based economy, in which companies struggle for market hegemony in very turbulent and fragmented markets, the firms require a total commitment from their staff in order to achieve the best results possible. That turn is easy to recognize in the shift of emphasis from an organization based on hierarchies to an organization based on a common culture. How can the manager obtain commitment from his workers in a situation when that commitment is almost compulsory? By addressing the workers to the core values of the firm. We no longer have bosses, but coaches. The workers are not numbers anymore, but members of a family. This is the departure point of a situation in the organization which is very similar to that which a family might represent for the employee. The first example of this trend of culture inside the enterprise is the Japanese-inspired management of the late seventies and first eighties. William Ouchi’s Theory Z is a clear example:

*These managers give us a feeling for the texture, the flesh and blood that comes to life in Type Z company. The top management is clearly dedicated not to brainwashing employees but to setting their objectives that permit every individual to satisfy their own self-interest while simultaneously serving the corporate interest. They seek an integrated social structure* (Ouchi, 1981: 209).

Thus the individuals can satisfy their own needs while they are serving, simultaneously, the corporate interest. This means that both individual and corporate interests are exactly the same. On the one hand, the employee is supposed to satisfy his desires through working hard for his bosses, for the company stockholders. On the other hand, he must *serve*, which is a
term covering an unequal relation to both boss and stockholder: it is a relation between master and servant. It could be argued that the employee also satisfies his self-interest because he is working for the company; he therefore earns some money which permits him to maintain a certain lifestyle. But it is also true that there is no other option: you need to work to survive, so we do not think there is any position of self-realization involved in this situation. We can also mention that in this discourse it is not possible to find any contradiction of interests. Therefore, this common situation appears entirely absent: that the company wants to achieve greater benefits whereas the worker wants to achieve a higher salary. Both things are not possible, so there is a contradiction because from a given budget you cannot cause everyone to win unless the budget grows, which is a futural factor (and in a risky market, is therefore pretty contingent). Ouchi follows with this statement:

*In fact, any differences that exist between employees at Z and other companies appear largely to have developed after entry and as consequence of being in one or the other corporate culture for a period of time. The individuals are equally aggressive and independent-minded in both companies, but in Company Z they believe in collective responsibility and action far more than do Company A people* (Ouchi, 1981: 215).

Individuals in Z company, again, are shown to be independent-minded and aggressive, whereas, at the same time, they are believers in collective responsibility. Two things emerge here, and one wonders whether it is possible to combine them. The first is competitiveness (which is omnipresent in the American dream), with its individualist focus. The second is the Japanese type of culture, which is influenced by Confucianism, in which group-decisions are crucial and there is not such a wide space for the individual. The fact is that it seems difficult to establish some kind of communitas when the basic bond with the company is the contract, and the financial and performative results. It is also difficult to be independent-minded and aggressive in a strong community environment, because when you are independent you are basically violating the true spirit of Gemeinschaft. This bizarre combination of American and Japanese ways of managing was very popular in the early eighties, Pascale and Athos’ *The art of Japanese management* being one of the classics of the era. The next sentence is another example of these paradoxical messages:

*How do you break through and get people to initiate, yet maintain, respect for top management’s decision-making responsibility and authority?* (Pascale and Athos, 1981: 159).

This question is another excellent example of paradoxical messages. On the one hand, people are encouraged to be free, they have to be innovative; on the other hand, we want to respect authority. People must be free but, on the other hand, must respect top-management’s decisions. So, what degree of freedom do they have? Freedom to obey? It seems like we achieve freedom following the objectives somebody else has set for us. Nevertheless, this contradictory push towards both freedom and respect for authority have prevailed in management discourses since then. After the great success of Peters and Waterman’s best-seller *In Search of Excellence* (1982), the discourses have focused on this vocabulary of freedom and rule-breaking, asking at the same time for total commitment to the relevant business affairs. Peters and Waterman recall that this is part of the human condition:

*We desperately need meaning in our lives and will sacrifice a great deal to institutions that will provide meaning for us. We simultaneously need independence, to feel as though we are in charge of our destinies, and to have the ability to stick out* (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 56).
According to these famous management gurus, we will sacrifice a great deal to institutions in order to procure meaning, which is to say that we want to follow something in order to have a meaning in our lives. Thus we are dependent. On the other hand, we need to seek independence. Again, we find a contradiction in human nature: we need both things at the same time. Where can we get our satisfaction from? *In the company* - a curious place to seek pleasure. In fact, their model gives space to that situation, as it is possible to achieve a coexistence of values:

*Virtually all of the excellent companies are driven by just a few key values, and then give lots of space to employees to take initiatives in support of those values – finding their own paths, and so making the task and its outcome their own* (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 72-73).

The workers have to support the company values whilst simultaneously finding their own values. This is possible where both values coincide. But what happens when both values cannot blend together? Let us think, for instance, of an enterprise which demands their employees to work long hours and whose culture is based on *commitment*. It is possible that those employees have families or friends and want to spend more time with them, or wish to spend time doing something else (e.g. fishing in the morning). Then there is the difference in values, but the workers are supposed to support the company values. So in the end we find that problem we mentioned before: employees do what they do not really want to do. The double bind appears when personal values do not coincide with company values. In fact, the contradictory messages appear constantly, even in the idea of what freedom is. Here we have an example:

*By contrast, the shared values in the excellent companies are clear, in great measure, because the mythology is rich. Everyone at Hewlett-Packard knows that he or she is supposed to be innovative. Everyone at Procter & Gamble knows that product quality is the sine qua non. In his book on P&G, *Eyes on tomorrow*, Oscar Schisgall observes: “They speak of things that have very little to do with price of product... They speak of business integrity, of fair treatment of employees. “Right from the start”, said the late Richard R. Deupree when he was chief executive officer, “William Procter and James Gamble realized that the interests of the organization and its employees were inseparable. That has never been forgotten”* (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 76).

Here we read again that the interests of the organization and its employees are inseparable. Once again there is a coincidence of goals. But we also find a peculiarity in this concept of freedom. Freedom is something which supposedly we look for. Nevertheless, if we want to be free, that should be a free decision. By this we mean that freedom cannot be something imposed, but something which has to be desired; if it is imposed, then maybe it is not real freedom - it is something different. If you are supposed to be innovative, then there is a degree of freedom, as long as you are committed to the key values of the enterprise; but that freedom ends when your values, for several reasons, start to divide from the company ones. In this text by Peters and Waterman we also read, in the comment about P & G, of the inseparable interests of organization and employees. It is curious to notice how the owners of the company decide that, not the workers.

In the nineties, the double binds in discourses become normalised, since the levels of commitment and freedom must be higher in the turbulent and globalized markets. Thus in Tom Peters’ work *Liberation Management* (1992), we find messages like these:
You are out of control when you are “in control”. You are in control when you are “out of control” (Peters, 1992: 465).

The freedom I experienced at the McKinsey Marvin Bower created was exhilarating. But for seven years I also suffered from almost constant headaches because of the expectations (Peters, 1992: 467).

My list of “top three” delegators consists of Mike Walsh, Pat McGovern (IDG) and Percy Bavernik (ABB). My top three autocrats are Mike Walsh, Pat McGovern, and Percy Bavernik (Peters, 1992: 467).

On the one hand, we’re going beyond hierarchy, and trying to liberate almost everyone in the organization. Yet that liberation leads to many a sleepless night – the result of membership in project teams with sky-high standards, imposed by oneself, but by demanding peers as well. This paradox, one of several, is the heart and soul of the bold new journey on which we’ve embarked (Peters, 1992: 473).

The first of these four paragraphs is the typical paradoxical message, in which you find a clear logical contradiction in the statement. You are in when you are out, you are out when you are in. The world seems to be upside down. In the next paragraphs we get more of these paradoxes. Therefore, we are free but we have to satisfy certain expectations, we have people who are delegators and autocrats at the same time, and, in the end, the paradox is the heart and soul of a new journey in the organization of labour. Even Peters recognizes that these messages are paradoxical. But Peters is not the only guru who uses these double bind messages:

A task-oriented, traditional company hires people and expects them to follow the rules. Companies that have reengineered don’t want employees who can follow rules; they want people who will make their own rules. As management invests teams with the responsibility of completing an entire process, it must also give them the authority to make decisions needed to get it done (Hammer and Champy, 1993: 70).

Hammer and Champy, the most widely-known preachers of Business Process Reengineering, do not want employees who follow rules, but people who make their own rules. Nevertheless, these rules have to be made to complete an entire process, which has been designed by the management team. So, the goals have been set already, but we have the freedom to do whatever we think is necessary to achieve them. Is this really freedom? Hamel and Prahalad focus on the same issues in their argument:

The goal is to grant individuals the freedom to design their own jobs, fix their own processes, and do whatever it takes to satisfy a customer. Yet are there limits to empowerment? We believe that empowerment without a shared sense of direction can lead to anarchy. While bureaucracy can strangle initiative and progress, so too can a large number of empowered but unaligned individuals who are working at cross-purposes. Of course, every employee should be empowered, but empowered to do what? Empowerment implies an obligation and an opportunity to contribute to a specific end (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994: 290).

People are empowered but they have to follow certain directions, as freedom is directly linked to the satisfaction of the customer’s desires. Freedom becomes an obligation, but also something which is not demanded but given. It has its limits, as it cannot lead to anarchy. The employee is free to do what the enterprise wants from him. Champy explains it even more clearly:
It’s the freedom at the heart of the disposal of the authority and accountability out to where the customers are. It’s the freedom to get out there ourselves. It’s the freedom without which we can never summon the ideas and images we need to meet the demands and opportunities of our markets (Champy, 1995: 205).

Freedom is understood simply in terms of accountability to the customers, since freedom comes from authority and accountability. It is freedom to meet demands and opportunities, not freedom to do something different such as change the socioeconomic and political conditions. This contradictory idea of freedom is the basis of these double binds in managerial discourses: the idea that being free is equivalent to achieving the financial objectives set by the enterprise.

Thus we find that the employees are constantly driven in two different directions. On the one hand, they must be free, break the rules, wear casual clothes, fix their own schedules, listen to MP3s at work, and so on. On the other hand, they must respect the top management’s authority, they must carry out the objectives, they must be accountable in their job. In sum, there is a tension between freedom and imposition. The messages encourage the workers and managers to be free; on the other hand, it is supposed that they must follow the top-management decisions and be committed to the enterprise.

What is the effect of these situation? Obviously, a situation of ambiguity is created. The employee cannot have a clear idea of what exactly the company demands from him, which puts him in a situation in which he is not able to take a decision. He is always asked to do contradictory things: breaking the rules and following the rules, being free and obeying, being creative but only in a heavily circumscribed manner, etc. These paradoxical orders underlie the new management discourses, which cover aiding competitiveness. Therefore, these are discourses which have a key social role, since they are used to justify the new politics of capitalism as well as the new labour relations. It is not difficult to realise that the ambiguity introduced has an important effect, just as we explained before: the individual trapped in a double bind situation basically cannot leave it, and can enter into a state of behaviour disorder. One possible hypothesis is that the double bind maintains him as committed to his work in a defensive way. He does not know what to expect, so he prefers to obey all the orders without reflecting upon the situation he is living. His resistance would simply decrease and the subjugation in organizations would achieve a higher level. Therefore, double bind discourses can be understood as a way of reinforcing power in organizations.

Our argument, then, is clear: these new managerial discourses are examples of a psychotic communication at a social level. Understanding double bind in a family situation must give us some clues about what might be happening in organizations. We might be speaking about organizational schizophrenia (the same gurus say that!), but it should also be understood that schizophrenia is a mental disorder, and has its consequences. It is not a normal state of mind, so maybe we might reflect the same argument at a social level with a simple question. Is this capitalist organization of society a normal state of the social?

Conclusion: understanding complex phenomena through interdisciplinarity.

In summary: in this paper we have tried to develop a transdisciplinary approach to a social phenomenon which is not easily identified. It is a social phenomenon but, to really deepen our knowledge of it, it is necessary to use tools from different areas of knowledge such as
psychology or logic. This paper has examined managerial double bind messages, by combining sociology of organizations, psychology and discourse analysis, and reflecting on the importance of interdisciplinarity in facing complex questions in which interactional communication is a key factor. We have discovered the closed relation between double bind discourses and the reinforcement of domination at the workplace. Ambiguity generates paralysis, and this has a close relation with the decline of resistance inside organizations (obviously, it is just one factor among many others). With this approach, we can improve our knowledge of the specific characteristics of the new management discourses and propose some kind of evaluation and diagnosis of the phenomenon.

We truly believe that it is necessary to combine different disciplines to study a social phenomenon which has not just a sociological, but also a psychological impact. The complexity of social phenomena can be tested in the need for interdisciplinary approaches. Therefore, we are moving at the frontiers, at the margins, not just because we are entering the transsociological through a different methodology, but because of the issues we have chosen to research.
References:


