The Interactional View – Paul Watzlawick
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The Interactional View

of Paul Watzlawick

The Franklin family is in trouble. A perceptive observer could spot their difficulties despite their successful façade. Sonia Franklin is an accomplished pianist who teaches advanced music theory and keyboard technique in her home. Her husband, Stan, will soon become a partner in a Big Four accounting firm. Their daughter, Laurie, is an honor student, an officer in her high school class, and the number two player on the tennis team. But Laurie's younger brother, Mike, has dropped all pretense of interest in studies, sports, or social life. His only passion is drinking beer and smoking pot.

Each of the Franklins reacts to Mike's substance abuse in different but less than helpful ways. Stan denies that his son has a problem. Boys will be boys, and he's sure Mike will grow out of this phase. The only time he and Mike actually talked about the problem, Stan said, "I want you to cut back on your drinking—not for me and your mother—but for your own sake."

Laurie has always felt responsible for her kid brother and is scared because Mike is getting wasted every few days. She makes him promise he'll quit using, and continues to introduce him to her straightlaced friends in the hope that he'll get in with a good crowd.

Sonia worries that alcohol and drugs will ruin her son's future. One weekday morning when he woke up with a hangover, she wrote a note to the school saying Mike had the flu. She also called a lawyer to help Mike when he was stopped for drunk driving. Although she promised never to tell his father about these incidents, she chides Stan for his lack of concern. The more she nags, the more he withdraws.

Mike feels caught in a vicious circle. Smoking pot helps him relax, but then his family gets more upset, which makes him want to smoke more, which. . . . During a tense dinner-table discussion he lashes out: "You want to know why I use? Go look in a mirror." Although the rest of the family sees Mike as "the problem," psychotherapist Paul Watzlawick would have described the whole family system as disturbed. He formed his theory of social interaction by looking at dysfunctional patterns within families in order to gain insight into healthy communication.

THE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM

Family system
A self-regulating, interdependent network of feedback loops guided by members' rules; the behavior of each person affects and is affected by the behavior of another.

Picture a family as a mobile suspended from the ceiling. Each figure is connected to the rest of the structure by a strong thread tied at exactly the right place to keep the system in balance. Tug on any string and the force sends a shock wave throughout the whole network. Sever a thread and the entire system tilts in disequilibrium.

The threads in the mobile analogy represent communication rules that hold the family together. Paul Watzlawick believed that in order to understand the movement of any single figure in the *family system*, one has to examine the communication patterns among all its members. He regarded the communication that family members have among themselves about their relationships as especially important.

Watzlawick (pronounced VAHT-sla-vick) was a senior research fellow at the Mental Research Institute of Palo Alto, California, and clinical professor of psychiatry at Stanford University. He was one of about 20 scholars and therapists who were inspired by and worked with anthropologist Gregory Bateson. The common denominator that continues to draw the Palo Alto Group together is a commitment to studying interpersonal interaction as part of an entire system. This sets their thinking apart from the widespread conception that communication is a linear process of a source sending a message through a channel to a receiver. In place of that transmission model, they picture communication as akin to an orchestra playing without a conductor.[1] Each person plays a part, affecting and being affected by all the others. It's impossible to isolate what causes what. It's interactional—so Watzlawick and his colleagues referred to their theory as the *interactional view.*

This systems approach suggests that interpersonal relationships are complicated, defying simplistic explanations of why family members do what they do. The Palo Alto Group rejects the notion that individual motives, personality traits, or DNA determines the nature of communication within a family or with others. In fact, these therapists care little about *why* a person acts a certain way, but they have great interest in *how* that behavior affects everyone in the group. For example, some pop psychology books on body language claim that a listener standing in a hands-on-hips position is skeptical about what the speaker is saying. Watzlawick was certainly interested in the reaction others have to this posture, but he didn't think that a particular way of standing should be viewed as part of a cause-and-effect chain of events:

$$a \rightarrow b \rightarrow c \rightarrow d$$

Relationships are not simple, nor are they "things," as suggested by the statement "We have a good relationship." Relationships are complex functions in the same sense that mathematical functions link multiple variables:

$$x = b^2 + \frac{2c}{a} - 5d$$

Just as x will be affected by the value of $a, b, c,$ or $d,$ so the hands-on-hips stance can be due to a variety of attitudes, emotions, or physical conditions. Maybe the stance does show skepticism. But it also might reflect boredom, a feeling of awkwardness, aching shoulder muscles, or self-consciousness about middle-aged love handles.

Watzlawick used the math metaphor throughout his book *Pragmatics of Human Communication.*[2] Along with co-authors Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don

Jackson, he presented key axioms that describe the "tentative calculus of human communication." These axioms make up the *grammar of conversation,* or, to use another analogy that runs through the book, the *rules of the game.*

There is nothing particularly playful about the game the Franklins are playing. Psychologist Alan Watts said that "life is a game where rule No. 1 is: This is no game, this is serious."[3] Watzlawick defined *games* as sequences of behavior governed by rules. Even though Sonia and Stan are involved in an unhealthy *game without end* of nag-withdrawal-nag-withdrawal, they continue to play because it serves a function for both of them. (Sonia feels superior; Stan avoids hassles with his son.) Neither party may recognize what's going on, but their rules are a something-for-something bargain. Mike's drinking and his family's distress may fit into the same category. (Getting drunk not only relieves tension temporarily, it's also a great excuse for sidestepping the pressure to excel, which is the name of the game in the Franklin family.)

Games
Sequences of behavior governed by rules.

Lest we be tempted to see the Franklins' relationships as typical of all families dealing with addiction, Watzlawick warned that each family plays a one-of-a-kind game with homemade rules. Just as CMM claims that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social worlds (see Chapter 6), the Palo Alto Group insists that each family system creates its own reality. That conviction shapes its approach to family therapy:

> In the systemic approach, we try to understand as quickly as possible the functioning of this system: What kind of reality has this particular system constructed for itself? Incidentally, this rules out categorizations because one of the basic principles of systems theory is that "every system is its own best explanation."[4]

AXIOMS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

As therapists who met with a wide variety of clients, the Palo Alto Group spotted regularly occurring features of communication among family members. Watzlawick stated these interactional trends in the form of axioms—the preferred way to present academic scholarship 50 years ago. He cautioned that these maxims were tentative and open for revision after further study. Despite the preliminary nature of these axioms, their publication played a key role in launching the study of interpersonal communication within our discipline.[5]

One Cannot Not Communicate

You've undoubtedly been caught in situations where you've felt obliged to talk but would rather avoid the commitment to respond that's inherent in all communication. Perhaps you currently need to study but your roommate wants to chat. In an attempt to avoid communication, you could bluntly state that your test tomorrow morning makes studying more important than socializing. But voicing your desire for privacy can stretch the rules of good behavior and result in awkward silence that speaks loudly about the relationship.

Symptom strategy
Ascribing our silence to something beyond our control that renders communication justifiably impossible—sleepiness, headache, drunkenness, etc.

Or what if you come home from a date or a party and your mother meets you inside the door and says, "Tell me all about it." You could flood her with a torrent of meaningless words about the evening, merely say it was "fine" as you duck into your room, or plead fatigue, a headache, or a sore throat. Watzlawick called this the *symptom strategy* and said it suggests, "*I* wouldn't mind talking to you, but something stronger than *I,* for which I cannot be blamed, prevents me."

Whatever you do, however, it would be naïve not to realize that your mother will analyze your behavior for clues about the evening's activities. His face an immobile mask, Mike Franklin may mutely encounter his parents. But he communicates in spite of himself by his facial expression and his silence. Communication is inevitable. Those nonverbal messages will obviously have an impact on the rest of his family. A corollary to the first axiom is that "one cannot *not* influence."[6]

Communication = Content + Relationship

Content
The report part of a message; *what* is said verbally.

The heading is a shorthand version of the formal axiom "Every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore metacommunication."[7] Watzlawick chose to rename the two aspects of communication that Gregory Bateson had originally called *report* and *command.* Report, or *content,* is *what* is said. Command, or *relationship,* is *how* it's said. Edna Rogers, University of Utah communication professor emerita and early interpreter of the interactional view, illustrates the difference with a two-word message:

Relationship
The command part of the message; *how* it's said nonverbally.

> The content level provides information based on what the message is about, while the relational level "gives off" information on how the message is to be interpreted. For example, the content of the comment "You're late" refers to time, but at the relational level the comment typically implies a form of criticism of the other's lack of responsibility or concern.[8]

Figure 13–1 outlines the content–relationship distinction that is crucial to the interactional model. Yet neither the equation in the heading above nor the terms in the figure quite capture the way relationship surrounds content and provides a context, frame, or atmosphere for interpretation. It's the difference between data fed into a computer and the program that directs how the data should be processed. In written communication, punctuation gives direction as to how the words should be understood. Shifting a question mark to an exclamation point alters the meaning of the message. Right? Right! In spoken communication, however, tone of voice, emphasis on certain words, facial cues, and so forth direct how the message was meant to be interpreted.

Metacommunication
Communication about communication.

Watzlawick referred to the relational aspect of interaction as *metacommunication.* It's communication about communication. Metacommunication says, "This is how I see myself, this is how I see you, this is how I see you seeing me. . . ." According to Watzlawick, relationship messages are always the most important

Content	Relationship
Report	Command
What is said	How it is said
Computer data	Computer program
Words	Punctuation
Verbal channel	Nonverbal channel
Communication	Metacommunication

FIGURE 13–1 The Content and Relationship Levels of Communication

element in any communication—healthy or otherwise. But when a family is in trouble, metacommunication dominates the discussion. Mike Franklin's dinner-table outburst is an example of pathological metacommunication that shakes the entire family system. The Palo Alto Group is convinced it would be a mistake for the Franklins to ignore Mike's attack in the hope that the tension will go away. Sick family relationships get better only when family members are willing to talk with each other about their patterns of communication.

The Nature of a Relationship Depends on How Both Parties Punctuate the Communication Sequence

Punctuate

Interpreting an ongoing sequence of events by labeling one event as the cause and the following event as the response.

Watzlawick uses the term *punctuate* to refer to the mental process of interpreting an ongoing sequence of events, labeling one event as the cause and the following event as the response. The fact that participants might view the sequence radically differently is captured in a classic cartoon displayed in many experimental psychology labs. One rat in a cage brags to another, "I've got my experimenter trained. Whenever I push this lever he gives me food."

In human relationships, divergent views of what-causes-what can give rise to great conflict. Consider the contrasting realities reflected in a typical argument between Sonia and Stan.

SONIA: Talk to Mike. The boy needs a father.

STAN: Mike's going to be OK.

SONIA: Don't be so passive. You'd never do anything if I didn't push you.

STAN: Quit harping on me all the time. It's because you nag that I withdraw.

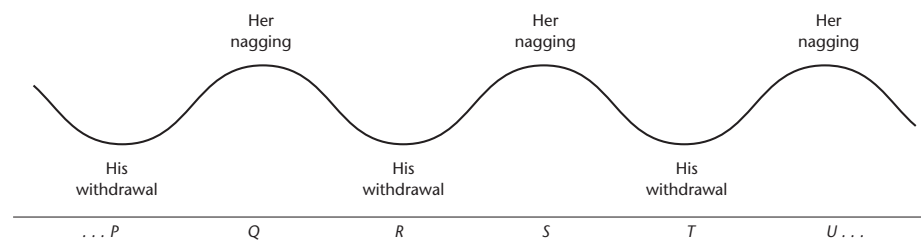SONIA: It's because you withdraw that I nag.

An outsider who observes the interaction diagrammed below will spot a reciprocal pattern of nagging and withdrawal that has no beginning or end. But Sonia, who is enmeshed in the system, *punctuates* or cleaves the sequence with *P, R,* or *T* as the starting point. She's convinced that Stan's passivity is the cause of her nagging.

Equally ensnared in the system, Stan punctuates the sequence by designating Sonia's nagging at point *Q* or *S* as the initial event. He's quite sure that her constant scolding is the reason he backs away. Asking either of them *Who started it?* wouldn't help because the question merely feeds into their fruitless struggle for control.

Watzlawick suggested that "what is typical about the sequence and makes it a problem of punctuation is that the individual concerned conceives of him or herself only as reacting to, but not as provoking, these attitudes."[9] Stan sees himself detaching from Sonia and Mike only because of his wife's constant nagging. Sonia feels certain that she wouldn't harp on the issue if Stan would face the problem of Mike's drinking. The couple will be trapped in this vicious circle

	Her nagging		Her nagging		Her nagging
His withdrawal		His withdrawal		His withdrawal	
. . . P	Q	R	S	T	U . . .

until they engage in a better brand of metacommunication—communication about their communication.

All Communication Is Either Symmetrical or Complementary

This axiom continues to focus on metacommunication. While definitions of relationships include the issues of belongingness, affection, trust, and intimacy, the interactional view pays particular attention to questions of control, status, and power. Remember that Bateson's original label for relationship communication was *command.* According to Watzlawick, *symmetrical* interchange is based on equal power; *complementary* communication is based on differences in power. He makes no attempt to label one type as good and the other as bad. Healthy relationships have both kinds of communication.

In terms of ability, the women in the Franklin family have a *symmetrical* relationship; neither one tries to control the other. Sonia has expertise on the piano; Laurie excels on the tennis court. Each of them performs without the other claiming dominance. Fortunately, their skills are in separate arenas. Too much similarity can set the stage for an anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better competition.

Sonia's relationship with Mike is *complementary.* Her type of mothering is strong on control. She hides the extent of Mike's drinking from his father, lies to school officials, and hires a lawyer on the sly to bail her son out of trouble with the police. By continuing to treat Mike as a child, she maintains their dominant–submissive relationship. Although complementary relationships aren't always destructive, the status difference between Mike and the rest of the Franklins is stressing the family system.

The interactional view holds that there is no way to label a relationship on the basis of a single verbal statement. Judgments that an interaction is either symmetrical or complementary require a sequence of at least two messages—a statement from one person and a response from the other. While at Michigan State University, communication researchers Edna Rogers and Richard Farace devised a coding scheme to categorize ongoing marital interaction on the crucial issue of who controls the relationship.

One-up communication (↑) is movement to *gain* control of the exchange. A bid for dominance includes messages that instruct, order, interrupt, contradict, change topics, or fail to support what the other person said. *One-down communication* (↓) is movement to *yield* control of the exchange. The bid for submission is evidenced by agreement with what the other person said. Despite Watzlawick's contention that all discourse is either symmetrical or complementary, Rogers and Farace code *one-across communication* (→) as well. They define it as *transitory* communication that moves toward *neutralizing* control.

Figure 13–2 presents the matrix of possible relational transactions. The pairs that are circled show a symmetrical interaction. The pairs in triangles indicate complementary relations. The pairs in squares reveal transitory communication. As Rogers' later research shows, bids for dominance (↑) don't necessarily result in successful control of the interaction (↑↓).[10] Matt, a student in my comm theory class, gained new insight about his relationship with his mother when he read this section:

> I'm really pumped on the interactional view. What makes me wide-eyed is
> how Watzlawick breaks down family communication into symmetrical and

Symmetrical interchange
Interaction based on equal power.

Complementary interchange
Interaction based on accepted differences of power.

One-up communication
A conversational move to gain control of the exchange; attempted domination.

One-down communication
A conversational move to yield control of the exchange; attempted submission.

One-across communication
A conversational move to neutralize or level control within the exchange; when just one party uses it, the interchange is labeled *transitory*.

Response to Message

	One-up	One-down	One-across

Initial Message

One-up

One-down

One-across

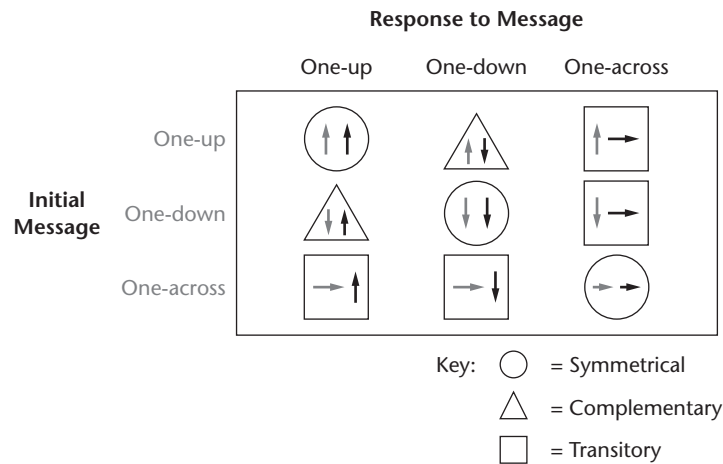Key: ◯ = Symmetrical

△ = Complementary

▢ = Transitory

FIGURE 13–2   Matrix of Transactional Types
Adapted from Rogers and Farace, "Analysis of Relational Communication in Dyads: New Measurement Procedures"

complementary. It brings to mind a statement my father would often say: "You and your mother have heated arguments because you are so similar." I usually dismissed this idea as baloney. I'd respond, "What, Mom and I similar? Yeah, right— look how often we disagree!" Looking back through the eyes of Watzlawick, Dad was right. Mom and I were both shooting out one-up messages, thus forming an ongoing symmetrical interaction that wasn't very comfortable.

TRAPPED IN A SYSTEM WITH NO PLACE TO GO

Enabler
Within addiction culture, a person whose nonassertive behavior allows others to continue in their substance abuse.

Family systems are highly resistant to change. This inertia is especially apparent in a home where someone has an addiction. Each family member occupies a role that serves the status quo. In the Franklin family, Mike, of course, is the one with "the problem." With the best of intentions, Sonia is the *enabler* who cushions Mike from feeling the pain caused by his chemical abuse. Stan is the "denier," while Laurie is the family "hero" who compensates for her brother's failure. Family therapists note that when one person in a distressed family gets better, another member often gets worse. If Mike stopped drinking and using pot, Laurie might quit the tennis team, ignore her studies, or start smoking marijuana herself. Dysfunctional families confirm the adage "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Double bind
A person trapped under mutually exclusive expectations; specifically, the powerful party in a complementary relationship insists that the low-power party act as if it were symmetrical.

Watzlawick saw family members as often caught in the *double bind* of mutually exclusive expectations, which Bateson originally described. Parental messages such as "You ought to love me" or "Be spontaneous" place children in an untenable position. The children are bound to violate some aspect of the injunction no matter how they respond. (Love can only be freely given; spontaneity on demand is impossible.) The paradox of the double bind is that the high-status party in a complementary relationship insists that the low-status person act as if the relationship were symmetrical—which it isn't. Stan's *demand* that his son stay sober for his *own sake* places Mike in a no-win situation. He can't obey his dad and be autonomous at the same time.

REFRAMING: CHANGING THE GAME BY CHANGING THE RULES

How can the members of the Franklin family break out of their never-ending game and experience real change in the way they relate to each other? According to Watzlawick, effective change for the whole family will come about only when members are helped to step outside the system and see the self-defeating nature of the rules under which they're playing. He calls this process *reframing:*

> To reframe . . . means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning.[11]

Watzlawick compared reframing to the process of waking up from a bad dream. He pointed out that during a nightmare you may run, hide, fight, scream, jump off a cliff, or try dozens of other things to make the situation better, but nothing really changes. Relief comes only when you step outside the system by waking up. Without the intervention of a timely alarm clock or a caring roommate, relief can be a long time coming.

Reframing
The process of instituting change by stepping outside of a situation and reinterpreting what it means.

Reframing is the sudden "aha" of looking at things in a new light. Suppose you could talk with Watzlawick about your struggles to keep up with the assignments for your comm theory class. You've chosen to be a communication major, so you believe you ought to *like* studying the material. Since you don't, you think there's something wrong with you. You also know that your family is making a financial sacrifice for you to be in college, so you feel guilty that you aren't getting good grades or experiencing deep gratitude for their help. In fact, you resent having to be grateful.

If you described these dilemmas to Watzlawick, he would want you to reframe your attitudes as *unrealistic* and *immature*—nightmarish interpretations for most college students. Even under the best of circumstances, he'd explain, studying is an unpleasant necessity and to believe that it should be fun is ridiculous. As far as your folks are concerned, they have a right to your gratitude, but that doesn't mean you have to *enjoy* being thankful. So it's up to you. You can "continue in these immature outlooks or have the adult courage to reject them and to begin to look at life as a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant things."[12] The *facts* haven't changed, but he's given you a new way to *interpret* them. If you accept Watzlawick's frame, you'll probably cope better and feel less pain.

For the Franklins, reframing means they must radically change their perspective. One way to do this is by adopting the view of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) that Mike's addiction is a disease over which he has no control. His drinking is not a sign of moral weakness or an intentional rebuff of his family's values—he drinks because he's an alcoholic. The AA interpretation would imply that the Franklins need to abandon their fruitless search for someone to blame. Despite Mike's look-in-the-mirror accusation, the members of his family aren't responsible for his addiction. They didn't cause it, they can't cure it, and they can't control it. It's a disease. Does that mean Mike's not responsible for being chemically dependent? Right . . . but he *is* responsible for putting all of his energy into getting well.

Accepting a new frame implies rejecting the old one. The Franklins must admit that their so-called solutions are as much a problem as their son's drinking.

The book contains a cartoon here.
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Mike will never seek treatment for his illness as long as his family continues to shield him from the consequences of his behavior. Reframing will help Sonia see that writing excuses and hiring lawyers may be less caring than letting her son get kicked out of school or allowing his driver's license to be suspended.

Adopting a tough-love perspective or any new interpretive frame is usually accomplished only with outside help. For Watzlawick, that meant therapy. As a social constructionist, he wouldn't try to discover the "real" reason Mike drinks or worry if it's "true" that some people are genetically predisposed to addiction. In his view, the main goal of therapy is to reduce pain. He would regard the disease model of addiction as an alternative construction—a fi ction, perhaps, but for the Franklin family a useful and less painful one. [13]

CRITIQUE: ADJUSTMENTS NEEDED WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Janet Beavin Bavelas co-authored *Pragmatics of Human Communication* with Watzlawick in 1967. Twenty-five years later, she reviewed the status of the axioms that are the central focus of the interactional view.[14] (Recall they were labeled as tentative.) Based on the research program she conducted at the University of Victoria in Canada, Bavelas recommends modifying some axioms of the theory. Her proposal serves as an informed critique of the original theory.

The first axiom claims that *we cannot not communicate.* Perhaps because of the catchy way it's stated, this axiom has been both challenged and defended more than the others. Although Bavelas is fascinated by the way people avoid eye contact or physically position themselves to communicate that they don't want to communicate, she now concedes that not all nonverbal behavior is

communication. Observers may draw inferences from what they see, but in the absence of a sender–receiver relationship and the intentional use of a shared code, Bavelas would describe nonverbal behavior as *informative* rather than *communicative.*

As Figure 13–1 shows, the Palo Alto Group treated the verbal and nonverbal channels as providing different kinds of information. Bavelas now thinks that the notion of functionally separate channels dedicated to different uses is wrong. She suggests a *whole-message model* that treats verbal and nonverbal acts as completely integrated and often interchangeable. In effect, she has erased the broken vertical line that divides Figure 13–1 down the middle—a major shift in thinking.

Whole-message model
Regards verbal and nonverbal components of a message as completely integrated and often interchangeable.

The content/relationship distinction of another axiom is still viable for Bavelas. As did Watzlawick, she continues to believe that the content of communication is always embedded in the relationship environment. Looking back, however, she thinks they confused readers by sometimes equating the term *metacommunication* with all communication about a relationship. She now wants to reserve the word for explicit communication about the *process of communicating.* Examples of metacommunication narrowly defined would be Laurie Franklin telling her brother, "Don't talk to me like a kid," and Mike's response, "What do you mean by that?" Laurie's raised eyebrows and Mike's angry tone of voice would also be part of their tightly integrated packages of meaning.

Despite Bavelas' second thoughts, I'm impressed with the lasting impact that Watzlawick and his associates have had on the field of interpersonal communication. The publication of *Pragmatics of Human Communication* marked the beginning of widespread study of the way communication patterns sustain or destroy relationships. The interactional view has also encouraged communication scholars to go beyond narrow cause-and-effect assumptions. The entanglements Watzlawick described reflect the complexities of real-life relationships that most of us know. In that way, the interactional view is similar to the other two interpretive theories covered in this section on relationship maintenance. All of them major in description of communication rather than prediction.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Systems theorists* compare the family system to a mobile. What part of the mobile represents *metacommunication?* If you were constructing a mobile to model your family, how would you depict *symmetrical* and *complementary* relationships?

2. For decades, the United States and the former Soviet Union were engaged in a nuclear arms race. How does Watzlawick's axiom about the *punctuation of communication sequences* explain the belligerence of both nations?

3. Can you make up something your instructor might say that would place you in a *double bind?* Under what conditions would this be merely laughable rather than frustrating?

4. At the start of this chapter, the interactional view is charted as a highly *interpretive theory* coming from the *cybernetic tradition*—a tradition mapped as relatively *objective* in Chapter 4. Can you resolve this apparent contradiction?

A SECOND LOOK

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www.afirstlook.com.

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19   Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* C. Emerson (ed. & trans.), University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, 1984, pp. 122–126.

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21   Leslie A. Baxter and Carma Byland, "Social Influence in Close Relationships," in *Perspectives on Persuasion, Social Influence, and Compliance Gaining,* John Seiter and Robert Gass (eds.), Pearson, Boston, MA, 2004, pp. 317–336.

22   *FLM Magazine,* Landmark Theatres, 2003.

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