

What are Double Binds?

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During workshops I'm often asked: What is a 'double bind' and why do you think "Be spontaneous!" and "Damned if I do and damned if I don't" are *not* examples of double binds?

My definition of a double bind is stricter than is commonly used, and I believe it elaborates Gregory Bateson and his colleagues' original definition.¹ As often happens, when a technical term such as 'double bind' is absorbed into everyday usage it becomes oversimplified. The original idea gains credence but at the cost of losing some of its value. This is particularly true when the original has a systemic element. "Let me give you some feedback" being a prime example. 'Feedback' being reduced to a piece of information rather than a systemic relationship between an entity and its environment.²

What is commonly referred to as a *double* bind I think of as a *single* bind. "Be spontaneous!" and "Damned if I do and damned if I don't" are good examples. They *may* refer to double-binding situations, but there is no evidence of that in the words alone. I would need to know more about them before they qualified as double-binds.

Difficulties

Any definition of a double bind must depend on the definition of a single bind. First, a bind is not a thing, it is a process. Secondly, a bind is not just something problematic or a difficult situation. I'm with Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues who defined a *difficulty* as:

an undesirable state of affairs which either can be resolved through some common-sense action or [a] quite common life situation for which there exists no known solution and which - at least for the time being - must simply be lived with.³

These difficulties may be problems, but *structurally* they are not binds.

Single (Primary) Binds

Watzlawick describes a separate class of problem as "impasses, deadlocks, knots, etc.". These are equivalent to my definition of a bind. However, I diverge from Watzlawick when he limits the etiology of binds to "created and maintained through the mishandling of difficulties." I agree this often happens, and in addition I follow Bateson and R. D. Laing in thinking that binds can also originate out of well-handled responses to untenable situations.

In *Metaphors in Mind*, Penny Tompkins and I defined an (unwanted) bind as a:

repetitive self-preserving pattern which the client has not been able to change, and which they find inappropriate or unhelpful. (p. 181)

The key word in this definition is "self-preserving" – the bind is organised in such a way that it maintains its existence almost regardless of the agents involved. In other words it involves a binding *pattern* of behaviours, thoughts and feelings that repeat over time which, *from within the internal logic, there appears no escape*.

We have pointed out that the four common kinds of binding patterns – conflict, dilemma, impasse, paradox – can only exist where there are two or more components which have complementary yet opposing or contradictory *intentions*. By this definition a single (or primary) bind requires two somethings to contradict each other *at the same level* – and for this to be problematic. However just because there are *two* of something in opposition does *not* make it a 'double' bind.

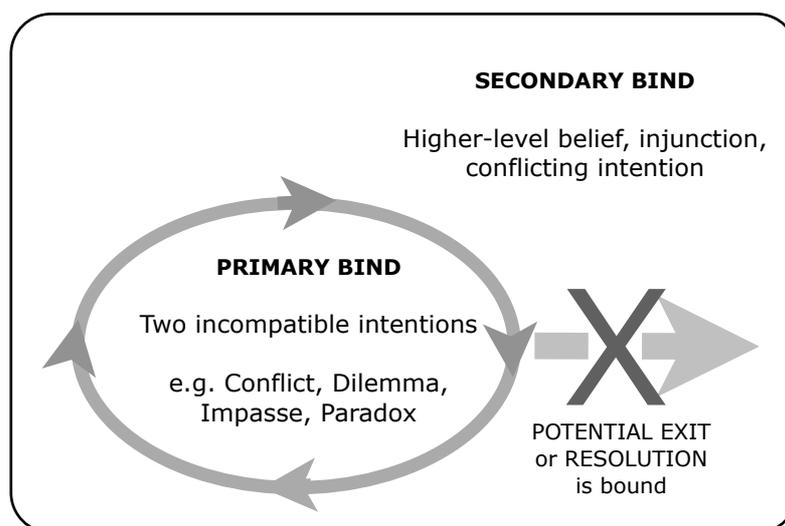
Bateson gives an example of "a primary negative injunction". A child is told: (a) "Do not do so and so, or I will punish you", or (b) "If you do not do so and so, I will punish you". I do not see either (a) or (b) as a bind. Every child on the planet gets told this. Without an additional element the child is not bound – all they have to do is follow the injunction. However, if we change the example so the child is told (a) and (b) either by different parents or by the same parent at different times, he or she is in an impossible situation. Similarly, if the child is unable to placate his or her 'want' to do what is forbidden, then the situation will keep repeating and there will be an internal struggle between a desire to satisfy the want and a desire to avoid being punished.

Double (Secondary) Binds

So what constitutes a *double* binding pattern? Let's say the child acquires a belief that "you mustn't question your parents". That would prevent the child from explaining his or her problem. And if we want to up the ante, the child may believe, "Good children obey their parents and go to heaven, bad children go to hell". Now the child's 'life' in the hereafter and forevermore is dependent on being good in a situation where he or she will inevitably fail.

But it is not just children who find themselves bound. Very often businesses and organisations put their employees in much the same situation. A company may espouse values of honesty and integrity and yet condone dishonest behaviour as long as they are making a profit. Although 'honest feedback' is requested, whistle blowers are persecuted. New employees quickly learn to keep their heads down. In this way the contradiction and deception of the organisation becomes internalised by the employees who may learn to put up with the incongruence but have to suffer the debilitating consequences.⁴

Simplifying *double* binding patterns to same-level conflicts removes a key aspect of the double-bind theory – that they involve multiple-levels, and that the higher, more abstract secondary bind is a *different kind* of bind to the lower-level primary bind. I don't think this is an academic point. Escape from the bind itself is bound which makes resolving a double-bind doubly difficult for the bound person. Accepting this reality is often the "first step" on the road to "recovery".



Crucially, from the bound person's perspective – from within their own logic – *there is no way out* of a double-binding pattern because of the impossibility of implementing a solution of the primary bind. This gives a way to know whether a statement refers to a single or double-binding pattern. If there an obvious (not necessarily easy) way out of the incompatibility of intentions then it is either a single bind or you don't have the full picture. For example, one way to not be bound by the

command "Be spontaneous!" is to reply, "No!". Similarly I have pointed out that, "damned if I do, and damned if I don't" is a single bind because there is only one level of bind – whatever the person does they are damned. This is not a problem if the person either rejects the idea of damnation, "Damnation can go to hell"; or doesn't care, "So damn me".

To turn "Damned if I do, and damned if I don't" into a *double* bind would require a further bind at a *higher* level, precluding escape from the primary bind. If a person believed "terrible things happen to people who reject damnation" or damnation could be enforced, by the Law for example, then the person *would* be doubly bound.

In today's complex society we are regularly confronted with situations that "put us in a bind" (to use an everyday expression). While there may be 'obvious' ways out of the bind, they are not necessarily easy for the bound person to implement because they challenge them to break habitual patterns, disregard social conventions and be assertive.

Often the key to understanding a double binding pattern is to notice that perfectly good ways to resolve single binds are constrained by the context. The constraint can be the physical environment (a child cannot leave home) but it can also be the metaphorical "environment" of the mind's beliefs and fears. Strangely, the sixth and perhaps most important of Bateson's "necessary ingredients for a double binding situation" is often forgotten:

Finally, the complete set of ingredients is no longer necessary when the victim has learned to perceive his universe in double bind patterns. Almost any part of a double bind sequence may then be sufficient to precipitate [the symptoms].

By the time the "victim" reaches this stage they have internalised the double-binding pattern sufficiently that it can be triggered with the merest help from others. The function played by external contradictory elements and intentions are taken over by aspects of the self. The degree of bound-ness will depend on how restrictive the bind is, how well they've learned to handle it, and how debilitating the effects are. For example, if I think not being spontaneous will harm me, then even an internal command to myself to "Be spontaneous" will be, as Bateson says, "sufficient to precipitate" the unpleasant symptoms of a double bind.

Mistaking a single for a double bind leads some modalities to address a=the primary bind without addressing the secondary bind. This sometimes provides a resolution, but often it does little in the long run. Some methodologies advocate putting a person in a 'therapeutic double bind', however they can forget that the aim is to "aid the patient in his emancipation from [binds]" (Bateson, p. 232). I take this to mean to facilitate the person to learn how to handle (double) binds in general.

To take the idea one iteration further, a triple bind (or a multi-double bind) can occur as a result of the *reaction* to being doubly bound. This can happen for example, to people who are heavily invested in being clever. What do they do when they recognise they can't resolve their own bind? How can they be clever and not solve their own problem? What does that say about who they are? Often the pain of their reality is so unbearable that they find temporary remedies such as getting drunk, having an affair, etc. which in the long run adds another layer to the binding pattern. Forest Gump's don't suffer with this problem.

Positive Binds

Finally, it is worth remembering that while we tend to focus on 'negative' binding patterns, our greatest strengths often result from being doubly bound to enact them. Steve Jobs couldn't not innovate.

And, qualitative leaps in learning and personal development involve "transcending and including" (Wilber) *both* our 'negative' *and* our 'positive' binding patterns. On the one hand binding patterns can cause untold suffering; on the other the pain motivates us to transform ourselves. I'll leave the last word to Bateson:

If a man achieves or suffers change in premises which are deeply embedded in his mind, he will surely find that the results of that change will ramify throughout his whole universe. (p. 306)

Further Reading (by Penny Tompkins and James Lawley)

Chapter 8 of *Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling* (2000)

Modelling the Structure of Binds and Double Binds, *Rapport 47*, Spring 2000.
cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/10/

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Using Symbolic Modelling with Binding Patterns, *The Listener*, EN#2, Oct 2012, pp.6-11.
cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/323/

When the Remedy is the Problem (2005)
cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/304/

And the following two blogs:

cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/45/2011-06-09-Stochastic-tinkering.html

cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/46/What-if-there-is-no-change.html

To read/see examples of us working with binding patterns:

Accepting Acceptance and its Paradoxical Nature (especially the transcript) (2009)
cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/239/

A video and transcript: When science and spirituality have a beer (2011)
cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/306/

References

¹ Bateson, G., D. Jackson, J. Haley, and J. Weakland, 'Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia', *Behavioural Science* (1956). In Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: a Revolutionary Approach to Man's Understanding of Himself*, 1972 (pp. 251-254).

To summarise, Gregory Bateson and his team (pp. 206–207) defined the “necessary ingredients for a double bind situation” as:

1. Two or more persons.
2. Repeated experience.
3. A primary negative injunction.
4. A secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a *more abstract level*, and ... which threatens survival.
5. A (possible) tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim escaping from the field.
6. Finally, the complete set of ingredients is no longer necessary when the victim has learned to perceive his universe in double bind patterns. Almost any part of a double bind sequence may then be sufficient to precipitate [the symptoms].

² 'Feedback Loops', Penny Tompkins and James Lawley (2005) cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/227/

³ *Change: Principles of Problem Formulation and Problem Resolution*, Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland and Richard Fisch, (1974), pp 38-39.

“Simply” living with an unsolvable and undesirable state of affairs is not always easy. What do you do with the *desire* for the situation to change – even if you know it can't? It's one thing to know you need to accept current reality, it's another to fully embody that knowing. There is a transcript of a client in just such a bind in Penny Tompkins and my article 'Accepting Acceptance' (see further reading).

⁴ *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*, Eviatar Zerubavel, Oxford University Press (2007).