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International Dialogue for Transforming Global Food Sustainability: A Batesonian Perspective

We have to move from just fighting for saving this species or that, to working with the preservation and development of living ecologies; from thinking of the environment as a thing, to seeing that it is a complex web of connections; from seeing it as other to experiencing it as part of us. There is no self, no nature, only nature self (Hawkins 2004).

Above, Hawkins summarizes Bateson, one of the first scholars to speak out regarding the ecological crisis facing our world, on the relationship between nature and self—that is, that they are one. Our paper looks at this increasingly urgent struggle by examining the case of a multinational's attempt to consider the needs of society and the environment in their its sourcing activities. For Bateson, the mind consists of information processing interactions among *Creatura* or entities in the living world. Similar mental processes occur in the larger relational systems in which we directly engage such as families, neighborhoods and organizations. These environments are made up of mental systems (Bateson, 1972).

We look at workshops through which decision makers at the multinational intended to develop an assessment tool to drive responsible raw materials sourcing, to which they invited perceived expert collaborators, including NGOs and academia. In Bateson's view, the complex processes of food production, natural systems that enable such production, the supply chains, processing, and delivery to food consumers are beings with minds. And for Bateson, our adaptive evolution as a species is tied up in information and knowing what it takes to survive.

In an interconnected world then, each human biography evolves and works with knowledge and information of the complex systems within which it is contextualized. Bateson defines three levels of systems: the individual, the social, and the ecosystem (pp. 437-38). We can see in an individual's biography, the presence of both the social systems, and the ecosystems in which they developed as they refer to their relationships and the natural world around them. Without conscious reflection, much of this is unconscious. These are present in their language, interactions and whether and how they are sharing information. Bateson says to his young daughter in the dialogue he reproduces in *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (1972), "I mean—all right, so they talk about baseball and gardens. But are they exchanging information? And, if so, what

information?...Some-times if both people are willing to listen carefully, it is possible to do more...Even to do more than exchange information. The two people may even find out something which neither of them knew before.” (p. 21-22).

Bateson writes, “I regard the grooves of destiny into which our civilization has entered as a special case of evolutionary cul-desac” (p. 505). He goes on to explain “...the frequency of use of a given idea be-comes a determinant of its survival in that ecology of ideas which we call Mind; and beyond that the survival of a frequently used idea is further promoted by the fact that habit formation tends to remove the idea from the field of critical inspection. Bateson links this point to language in his dialogue with his daughter at the beginning of the book. He says, “We all have lots of readymade phrases and ideas...in order to think new thoughts or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces” (p. 26). In other words, the idea is held in place by habits of language.

The lens provided by Bateson helps us to explore the impact language had on group learning and the possibility of breaking out of the “evolutionary cul-desac”.

Research Methods

Rachel has been studying issues related to Latin America and Latinx in the United States for well over a decade, having completed research projects on Latin American women immigrants to the U.S. (Brooks, Brooks-Ames & Womack, 2007) and the impact of different types of development intervention on the internal economy of an indigenous community in Panama’s Darien province. She also co-founded the online newspaper Latin America News Dispatch (LAND) and managed a Fair Trade coffee harvest in Costa Rica. The research on which this current paper draws on her interest in the long history of resource extraction from the Global South, the impact this continues to have on rural communities, and what it means for the social and environmental health of our planet. Her dissertation looks at a multinational corporation’s development of a social needs assessment tool. Specifically, she studied how the input from farmers was shaped by the communication channels through which it traveled and by the primary stakeholders’ focus on the measurement tool. In collaboration with her co-author, she has recently begun drawing out the implications for learning.

She collected the data we use here from 2012 - 2014. It comes primarily from two Social Conditions Evaluation (SCE) workshops (name and acronym changed to protect confidentiality of the organization and participants), organized by the Multinational Corporation (MNC), which took place over a total of three days. We supplement data from the workshops with data collected in follow-up interviews with the MNC employees via telephone. Due to restrictions associated with confidentiality, Rachel took detailed notes, including verbatim quotes, instead of voice-recording workshops or phone interviews. She was simultaneously consulting with the MNC on research methods for the SCE and visited the headquarters on a number of additional occasions.

We characterize research as a mix between observation and participant observation, as Rachel was actively consulting on indicators and methods for the SCE and therefore contributing to discussions in workshops. Separate from her doctoral research, she was hired as a freelance consultant to conduct the SCE for the company's coffee supply chain in one Latin American sourcing country.

Typically, between six and ten MNC employees attended the workshops and five and seven of the external partners and NGO employees attended. The first author attended two workshops and conducted additional interviews at headquarters with five of the workshop attendees from MNC. From MNC, Peter was the head of the hierarchy when it came to the SCE; Michael was a middle manager driving the SCE process with an operational focus on coffee; Dan was centrally focused on stakeholder relations and alliances with external contributors; Thomas was a middle manager operationally focused on cocoa; Mario was a middle manager focused on beverages in general; and Gabriella was an intern hired as a coordinator for the development and implementation of the SCE.

The Case

As discussed, the case we look at involves a large global food multinational's attempts to develop an assessment tool, the SCE, for determining social needs and opportunities for business focused sustainability projects in their raw materials sourcing supply chains. Decision makers in this company, which we refer to here as "the multinational", had been pressured by their Creating Shared Value (CSV) board to generate more meaningful sustainability efforts in their raw materials sourcing activities. Creating Shared Value (Porter & Kramer 2006) comes on the heels of Corporate Social Responsibility, in that it attempts to promote more responsible behavior on the part of businesses with regard to both society and the environment. However, where CSR involves businesses making philanthropic contributions to both, CSV is centrally focused on acting responsibly while generating positive business impact as well. The idea is for companies to contribute to society, the environment, and their economic bottom lines simultaneously.

According to interviews with employees at MNC headquarters, the event spurring the CSV board to put pressure on decision makers was an internationally recognized annual meeting in western Europe, at which high-level diplomats, UN representatives, businesses, and many others discussed pressing global concerns with economic emphasis. A well-known Hollywood actress publically criticized the multinational's social and environmental record, and asked what it planned to do differently in the future. The then-CEO responded that they were a business, and would not be acting like a charity.

A widespread negative public reaction followed, and the MNC jumped to action and set targets. Out of this push, decision makers identified what they saw as a need to create a universal assessment tool for use in global sourcing communities.

The MNC was a decentralized organization. Headquarters played an ideological directing role, but "markets" in each country often behaved independently. They determined what activities made sense in their given contexts, frequently with little input from

headquarters. Many countries already had sustainability activities in place, the details of which, headquarters did not always know. For headquarters to generate a universal tool was risky, as it simply might not make sense for country level activities. Yet to satisfy international regulations, expectations, and public opinion, decision makers needed to follow the trend of sustainable sourcing and generate a tool to show their actions and impact. Since they did not know how to do this, they searched for perceived expert input from international NGOs.

“A living system”.

To assist the evolution of organizational culture, one first has to start by attending to these deeper organizing principles, which are not accessible from questionnaires or individual interviews, but can be glimpsed in the oft repeated *stories* and *shared metaphors*; the collective ways of *tackling issues*; the recursive *patterns of behaviour*, the shared unwritten rules and the collective emotional patterns that rarely can be articulated but which are communicated to the outsider through ‘empathic resonance’ (Hawkins, 2004) (*emphasis added*).

At the end of the series of workshops, supplemented by additional projects and meetings carried out with the external partners, MNC decision makers wanted to have completed the SCE. They wanted it to become “the way we do business”. In saying this, decision makers verbalized a hope that the organization would evolve. However, conversations in workshops suggested that really, they hoped that there was no need for deep change. They wanted to use the SCE to show a wide audience that existing activities were already socially and environmentally responsible.

Considering how workshops played out using Bateson’s view of organizations as living systems helps us understand how relationships linking participants with one another and with the multinational shaped individual actions. For example, regarding the timing of generating the assessment, Michael said, “We see the urgency to do it [develop the tool] now since 2015 is around the corner. What are the indicators referring to plantlets, training, but also outcomes? I am here trying to find out what is a realistic work plan to make it happen. I want to establish a work plan.”

This comment shows foremost the time pressure placed on the project, a topic that emerges repeatedly in the workshops, as Michael shuts down a number of conversations he does not deem directly linked to establishing “touch points” or a “work plan”. The more pressure decision makers were under, the more they pushed for “indicators” and “outcomes”. In this excerpt, plantlets and training are parts of the system, but instead of their relationship to each other, the relationship of these parts to MNC headquarters is what’s critical to the speaker. For decision makers, plantlets are a number, and this number has a certain meaning to a larger international audience; what plantlets symbolize in this relationship is worth money. Michael’s relationship to outcomes is instrumental and personal: achieving them has direct bearing on his performance at his job. The outcomes themselves are not important, but Michael’s relationship to outcomes is critical. Finally, the focus on a work plan sets the tone for all of the workshops. The generation of this work plan (or lack thereof) colors how decision makers value the external partners

providing consulting. It also colors how they are later able to qualify the success (or lack thereof) of the workshops to others. The work plan is irrelevant, but relationship of all workshop participants to the work plan is vital.

Decision makers told their external partners in workshops that they wanted the tool to provide a “helicopter view” and help them identify “gaps” in which they could intervene, contributing positively to society, the environment, and business targets. Both stated objectives are worth noting, as they demonstrate the importance of relationships. A “helicopter view” brings to light how various parts move in relation to one another. The defining characteristic of a “gap” is that a relationship that is otherwise there is not there in a given instance. One challenge decision makers encountered is that the external partners they sought out could contribute feedback on parts, but not relationships. They knew what the various ingredients of social and environmental sustainability were, but they did not understand the relationships between these parts in the context of the multinational. The multinational’s focus on indicators also stymied meaningful conversations and contributions. If we view indicators as parts abstracted from a complex whole, then we see that without relationships grounding them, they risk being meaningless. For example, we can count trees on a farm in Mexico, but if we do not see how they are distributed, we know nothing about whether they are contributing positively to environmental health.

Enacting cultures through storytelling.

Bateson’s view of organizations provides a helpful lens for understanding the course taken by conversations between multinational decision makers and their external partners. Bateson’s work led to the notion that organizing principles of a culture (the MNC and each NGO and association with whom it worked each being distinct cultures) are rooted in collective mindsets and “motivational roots of those in the organization...and that behaviors...are the symptomatic manifestations of these principles” (Hawkins, 2004; Hawkins, 1997; Schein, 1992).

The organizations from which decision makers at the multinational wanted input were the Human Rights Institute (HRI), Workers Rights Authority (WRA), Save Our Primary Forests Association (SOPFA) and Concurrencia (all names and acronyms changed to protect participants). Representatives of these organizations attending workshops, like decision makers at the MNC, enacted their “motivational roots” as individuals, but also the collectively generated organizing principles enacting the culture within their given organizations. Bateson called this motivation “survival” (p. 437).

Specifically, the HRI was an organization funded by the government of a European country, focused on protecting human rights within that country and internationally. It marketed itself as being experienced in collaborating with businesses in a consulting function on issues related to human rights. The WRA was an association of universities, civil organizations, and companies focused on defending workers’ rights internationally. It also claimed a collaborative approach to consulting activities for companies related to compliance. SOPFA was a very well known international network saying it was

comprised of farmers, communities, governments, and companies focused on promoting ongoing environmental health and livelihoods. Like the aforementioned organizations, it prided itself publically on its capabilities in collaboration. Finally, Concurrencia was an international network that stated its vision as a global reality in which producers of raw materials could contribute to prosperity for society and the environment for the sustainability of future generations.

As stated by Hawkins (2004), those working from Bateson's perspective note the importance of stories and metaphors in communicating the organizing principles of a culture, and the role these play in any evolution of organizational culture. At the multinational, decision makers used stories and metaphors to reduce complexity when explaining or trying to understand challenges across diverse, international supply chains. These stories made abstract notions such as "quality of life indicators" easier for employees to visualize. Decision makers used the same story over and over again. Peter, who was responsible for driving the CSV agenda at the multinational, often talked about "what an impact a motorbike would have". He said that in one sourcing country, workers with motorbikes found more work and as a result, had higher incomes. In his view, this made motorbikes an indicator of wellbeing. The story itself simplified the abstract notions of poverty and wellbeing into regular bikes versus motorbikes, creating a collective understanding within the MNC of poverty versus wellbeing.

If, in line with Bateson, we use this story to gain insight into the collective mindsets comprising the multinational's culture, we see that at this organization, the normalized and decent goal was to isolate abstract parts of farmers' lives (motorbikes), and extrapolate what that meant in terms of wealth (wellbeing). Moreover, the objective in doing this was to attribute "wellbeing" improvements to actions of the multinational. Here, again, Bateson's emphasis on relationships offers critical insights; motorbikes mean nothing, but as a potential indicator within a framework for the multinational's sustainability reporting, they become vitally important.

Viewing the assessment tool itself as a story also offers valuable insights into the multinational's collectively created culture. Through it, decision makers abstracted indicators (parts) on which they would report from a much bigger picture, thereby failing to include a strong context (relationships). Since in line with Bateson, relationships are the lens through which we can best understand an organization's story, the story then told by the assessment tool would be that of the multinational's choosing, rather than a "picture" of farmers and communities.

Multinational decision makers used metaphors as storytelling tropes in glossing over complex content in their processes and conversations. That is, when they were asked about issues they did not fully understand, they inserted metaphors as placeholders, thereby not having to explore or explain them further. By telling partners that the SCE should generate "the big picture", they relieved themselves of having to consider and delineate specific outcomes. However, this made it difficult to identify the stakeholders involved in or responsible for outcomes. The lack of clarity implied by the request to generate "the big picture" also made it next to impossible for external partners to

contribute valuable input. This speaks poignantly to Bateson's conversation with his daughter referenced earlier, "We all have lots of readymade phrases and ideas...in order to think new thoughts or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces."

Another example of this is how decision makers described their approach to developing the assessment tool. Michael and Dan both explained that it was like "building the plane while we were flying." This metaphor delivers an exciting and telling image for what went on, but using it allowed decision makers to avoid describing what they actually experienced and critically examining it, thereby forestalling any learning that might have provided a more systemic understanding of the complex relationships between the multiple stakeholders in the process. Therefore, with the coming and going of employees in an environment of high turnover, these learnings will likely be lost.

In addition to metaphor, decision makers spoke in a "bullet point" storytelling approach, which minimized opportunities for reflection and analysis. This was particularly the case when it came to new experiences implied by unfamiliar territory. In the aftermath of the workshops, when asked what the next steps were in the tool's development, Michael said:

We will work with partners internally and externally and follow a four-step approach through goal alliance, target planning, and bring it into organizational master-planning so that the steps are embedded in operations... to be honest, there are so many things which are interlinked. It's about broader stratification, not just knowing people get water from the river. If coffee is going down the drain, maybe we shouldn't distribute plantlets.

Here, we see "bullet point" storytelling in Michael's delineation of "a four-step approach" and "target planning". But partway through, he breaks from this method, as the high level of complexity renders it senseless: "...there are so many things which are interlinked." Bullet point language did not provide the flexibility Michael needed to describe what he saw as important. For that, he had to use examples from specific activities, such as whether or not the company should be distributing coffee plantlets. Interestingly, it was where the point of discussion diverged most starkly from familiar organizational experience that there was the greatest potential for learning. Where just slight differences existed, it was typically still possible to discuss issues using corporate jargon, which glossed over issues of divergence and emphasized the homogenous. But where no corporate language existed to describe a given experience, decision makers had to speak and think in detail, bringing to light the people getting "water from the river".

Time, expectations, emotions and learning.

It became clear in workshops that the multinational was accustomed to working on a faster timeline than the consulting social and environmental NGOs and associations. As discussed, within the multinational's culture, people communicated with one another through bullet-points, targets, benchmarks and budgets. Within the workshops, they wanted a "starting point", to know "the minimum we think we should be doing", the

“non-negotiables”, and the “compliance indicators”. The external consulting organizations moved more slowly, communicating through long, extensively researched reports. Again, we can view these differing forms of communication through the lens of Bateson, as stories—the concrete artifacts of disparate organizing principles. This difference in how both kinds of organizations told stories, however, led to conflict.

For example, prior to one workshop, the multinational asked the HRI to prepare a presentation on “gaps” and “opportunities” for CSV in a cocoa sourcing country. At the workshop, the HRI presented a report of over seventy pages. Thomas, an employee of MNC, was visibly irritated. “How can you prioritize?” he asked. “I don’t think you did. We had to read everything.” The HRI representative, appearing embarrassed and defensive, said that it was not her job to define priorities and that the multinational decision makers had to do that themselves. Thomas said, “What benefit is the report if you’re not giving us the priority?” Here, the bullet point “storytelling” method of the multinational conflicted with the long report “storytelling” method of the HRI, the two people enacting them against one another. The negative emotions and perceptions that arose as a result inhibited potential for learning on both sides.

In terms of the potential for organizational evolution in the case we examined, we turn to Bateson. According to Bateson, there are various kinds of learning that can happen within organizations, but relevant in our case are “‘zero learning’, the acquisition of data or information that does not create a difference or change” and “‘Learning I’, in which skill learning is acquired through trial and error selection of a possibility within a set of options...” (Hawkins 2004). The multinational attempted to achieve Learning I, with those responsible for developing the assessment tool expecting organizations and decision makers at workshops to delineate the set of options for indicators for them to choose from. They hoped the result would become “the way we do business”, without recognizing that the act of cherry picking indicators had little chance showing a complex whole, enabling deep set change.

Conflicting cultural storytelling methods within attending organizations made it difficult for people to understand one another. Decision makers were able to generate a tool, but the set of options they assembled from what their partners presented them did not result in information that was important within all their subsidiary markets. This kind of learning is quickly cast aside, or viewed as just “ticking a box”—ultimately, we can view this as a ‘zero learning’ situation. Whether an assessment tool can drive improvements in the concept of “wellbeing” on farms and in communities remains a big open question, however at the very least, the tool must be generated within a systems perspective.

Unlike in the organizational learning traditions that Hawkins describes, Bateson’s work as an anthropologist also makes the point that we unconsciously enact our cultures as we communicate as illustrated by his conversation with his daughter about why Frenchmen wave their hands when they talk (1972, p. 19). Biographically, we “make” and are “made by” the ecologies we inhabit, whether natural or human-made ecologies.

Final Reflections

In Bateson's view, "The organization is created and sustained not just by those within the organization but also the organization's range of stakeholders. These include: customers; suppliers; investors; commentators; influencers; politicians; and the communities in which the organization operates" (Hawkins 2004).

This couldn't ring more true in the case of the multinational corporation we consider. However, each individual *co*-forming the Mind of the organization interacts with only a small portion of a massive, dynamic, living system. Even its borders are murky, with reverberations of MNC's activities felt by arguably everyone on the planet. How to spur learning and change in this kind of environment is daunting to consider.

At the conclusion of our exploration here, the challenges are easier to identify than the opportunities. Bateson's "purposive consciousness" points out that our conscious awareness is mostly bounded by our efforts to satisfy our immediate desires, which we see both in the case of the MNC's decision makers, and their external partners in workshops (Human Adaptation, 1967).

At workshops, decision makers enacted their purposive consciousness through their use of "bullet point" storytelling and simplifying metaphors. Even though many individual decision makers wanted to help improve well-being of farmers and communities, their focus on time pressures and dogged commitment to targets and work plans drew their attention away from the issue they had actually come together to address—promoting improved social and environmental health (while Bateson sees these as one, they often remained separate for MNC). Language reduced decision makers' need to interact with specific and complex challenges that were outside their existing experience, and emphasized parts over relationships. They prevented decision makers and their external partners from seeing details of a complex situation, learning, and responding meaningfully.

Purposive consciousness on the part of consulting organizations involved wanting to appear competent and informed while getting their organizations' needs addressed in the assessment tool. But they were at a disadvantage without a clear understanding of the relationships associated with parts in the context of MNC's international sourcing activities. Decision makers' embeddedness in the Mind of their own organizational culture prevented them from seeing that their partners had little chance of contributing meaningfully without a clear understanding of the multinational's structure and sourcing operations. Lack of clarity, contrasting Minds associated with differing communication or "storytelling" styles, and language tropes that hid complexity resulted in misunderstandings and interpersonal conflicts, inhibiting discussions in the workshops, and the potential for learning on both sides.

However, Bateson also saw the aesthetic process as important to planetary well-being. For him, a commonality of human beings is that we have a deep knowledge and yearning

to integrate the ancient ecosystems that we find beautiful (Human Adaptation, 1967, in Bateson, 1972). Perhaps we do not need to understand every link and reverberation in the ecosystem in which we find ourselves, including organizations. In the case we explore, the most inhibiting factors when it came to learning were time and language. When pressed by deadlines, language habits restricting insights and dynamic new approaches became binding. Language ties its users to what they know. If workshops were to be carried out again, one concrete step towards more meaningful outcomes would be for participants to specify the meanings of the metaphors and corporate jargon they use—actively rephrasing them. The process of teasing out the meanings of underspecified metaphors and terminology might take root in organizational consciousness, the collective mindsets responsible for the organizing principles. While the both the embeddedness in institutional work cultures and the motivation to survive linked to performance mitigate against the sharing of biographies as a means to understanding the various ecologies we each unconsciously inhabit within a context like the SCE workshops, perhaps we can reshape these interlinked ecologies by identifying default behavior in our metaphors, stories, and language.

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