

Schizophrenia: Double Bind Theory



This activity will help you to:

- Understand and recall what is meant by a double bind
- Identify features of double binds
- Analyse social interactions in terms of double bind theory

Double binds in family relationships

According to Gregory Bateson (1956) schizophrenia should not be regarded as a problem that exists entirely inside an individual's mind. Rather, the individual's symptoms are best understood as a manifestation of a wider problem occurring within their family. Bateson believed that schizophrenia resulted from the use of double-bind communication. Parents who send out mutually contradictory signals place their children in impossible situations where they cannot act without in some way going against their parent's apparent wishes. This causes a state of internal conflict, which cannot be resolved by any course of action the person may choose (including withdrawal, which is not an option). Schizophrenic symptoms are the result of an attempt to resolve the impossible situation in which the person has been put.

Here are some descriptions of double bind communication in action. Try to identify where the contradictory signals occur. Make notes so you can discuss them later.

A woman tells her boyfriend that she wants him to be more spontaneous.

A father tells his son that he has to make his own choices about what to do.

Do not read this sentence.

A young man who had fairly well recovered from an acute schizophrenic episode was visited in hospital by his mother. He was glad to see her and impulsively put his arm around her shoulders whereupon she stiffened. He withdrew his arm and she asked, 'don't you love me any more?' He then blushed and she said, 'Dear, you must not be so easily embarrassed and afraid of your feelings'. (Bateson, 1956, p258).