

## Paradoxes: No Simple Matter

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Paradox: *A situation, fact or statement which seems impossible and/or difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics. For example: The statement "I am a liar" is a paradox because if the statement is true, it must be false and if it is false, it must be true*<sup>1</sup>.

In 1973 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell wrote, "women in American society are always in a vortex of contradiction and paradox, (84)." She concluded her path-making essay, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," by quoting Sally Kempton: "No matter the many differences

among women, we share the paradox of having to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.' (86)." Campbell's analysis can be seen repeatedly in Linda's story and our commentary that follows it.

### Linda's Story: A Case Study

#### Inner contemplations of the late 1960s through mid-1970s

*"If I jump headfirst out the window, would that do it? What if it didn't? What if I break my neck and cannot move? Would it be very bloody? What if the kids discover me?"*

*"My arms aren't long enough for a rifle. Do we still have the handgun? That would be bloodier than jumping but more likely to do the trick."*

*"Maybe driving into a tree. Mum used to talk about that. She didn't want to die, she just sometimes felt like driving very fast into a tree. I can identify with that. I also can't look down from high places; not usually, anyway. Not that it scares me, but I might jump. Would it feel like flying? I could fly when I was little. Who taught me I couldn't fly?"*

*"I wish these thoughts would go away. Why do they persist? Who would believe it? Certainly no one in my quiet little hometown; not my family. My neighbors can see I have it all. I am married to 'Mr. Nice Guy,' have two beautiful daughters, a large new two-story home, every modern convenience, a new car, everything you could possibly want. What is wrong with me? I feel guilty – great; not only am I crazy, but now I have to feel guilty, too."*

#### Regaining sanity in the late 1970s

It seems as if several lifetimes have past since those days of constant debate about suicide, craziness, and guilt. As hard as I try to remember how it all evolved, or each of the factors, it is much like the pain of childbirth—hidden in a little crevice of my mind where the pain lies quietly still. What I remember most vividly, however, is when I got the connection between my craziness and the concepts of

paradoxes and paradoxical injunctions that place people in untenable positions. I since realized these situations were undetectable when I was in them, and consisted of almost mundane factors when I look back on them.

In 1978, as a "returning student," I was taking an "Introduction to Human Communication" class at the University of New Hampshire. The professor, Pat Fleming, had an ability to help students apply concepts and theories to their own lives and, thus, awaken each of us to the significance of what we were living and learning. It was in this course, I had a revelation about my previous insanity. Suddenly, I realized my craziness was a logical response to the situation in which I had lived. In the "invisibility" lies the key. Usually, binding situations are invisible when you are in them; they are obvious, yes, seem almost trite, when you are outside of them. Maybe that gives them their power. Maybe the incidences are so minor, it would be silly to blame them for one's craziness. But, it is not only their triteness, it also is the repetition of numerous compounded paradoxical messages, given on multiple levels (verbal/nonverbal/vocal/non-vocal) that gives them their power. Certainly, the power of paradoxical messages is related to other key factors within the relationship. One's perceived ability to survive outside the relationship, the extent to which one needs others' approval to feel good about oneself, and the way one otherwise is being treated in the relationship are a few determining factors. In my relationship with my husband, I received from him many contradictory and paradoxical messages. From these, I was trapped in double binds that kept me in an untenable position, which, ultimately, drove me crazy. Here are a few examples of some messages I received from my husband:

- Cleanliness of the House:  
*"Keep the house spotless so I will be proud of it when we have company."*

*"This house is always so spotless, no one wants to visit here. People feel like they should invite us to*

their house in return but feel they couldn't possibly have theirs looking this spotless."

- Sexuality:

"I am more attracted to you when you look sexy and the other guys get jealous."

"I get angry when you dress sexily because I see other men watching you and probably think you are easy."

- Work:

"You need to get a job instead of just hanging around the house doing nothing all day." (Said when I was not employed)

"You need to quit working, I don't like you to use your energy out there when you should be home taking care of the house and family." (Said as soon as I got a job)

- Communicating:

"I am attracted to you because you are so outspoken"

"Please be quiet, you embarrass me when you speak out"

The following two examples more closely reflect the criteria for paradoxical injunctions set forth by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson in *The Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967) which was the first "official" place I read about the reasons for my latent, blatant insanity. First, I should note that I was in a complementary relationship (one in which I did not have as much control as my husband). I received many verbal and non-verbal messages that controlled my behavior, or should I say, halted my ability to behave in any way that would ultimately lead to my husband's approval and my sanity:

Linda's case is paradigmatic of many women's experiences. Most of us could relate similar thoughts, whether about partners, work, family or, as Campbell wrote, feminist movements. Perhaps paradox is as nearly a universal human experience as there is, given the ubiquity of talk about it. Whether from "ordinary folk," or scholars, poets, politicians, activists, or philosophers the comments are endemic. Because each in its way is instructive, we offer a number of thoughts for consideration, first from the Beacon book of *Quotations by Women* (Maggio, 1996):

"Consistency is a human word, but it certainly expresses nothing human." L. E. Landon, in *Francesca Carrara* (136).

- A good wife stays with her husband, regardless. (Therefore, even if a husband is the abusive one, it is the wife who is evil for leaving the relationship).

- Loving mothers prefer to stay home with their children. (Thus, if a mother prefers to work outside the home, then she does not love her children.)

Even now, I sometimes say to myself, why didn't I just point out to my husband the impossibility of meeting his demands? Why didn't I simply leave? Obviously there were a lot more problems than represented here which demonstrates even more clearly the insanity of staying in the marriage. There is, however, an answer to the question of why I stayed in the relationship that comes directly from *Pragmatics*:

As soon as we begin to look at paradox in interactional contexts, the phenomenon ceases to be merely a fascinating pursuit of the logician and the philosopher of science and becomes a matter of stark practical importance for the sanity of the communicants, be they individuals, families, societies, or nations (195).

Through the years of manipulation, explicit and implicit contradictory verbal and non-verbal commands, I had become quite crazy. Fortunately for me, the marriage ended. Yet not until I learned about paradoxical injunctions was I finally relieved from my guilt. This is why when Anita offered me an opportunity to co-edit this special edition of *Women and Language*, I jumped at the chance. I thought back to that time long ago and imagined thousands resembling me, staring out a window wondering why they could and could not jump. Maybe this one true confession might be more than "a fascinating pursuit of the logician and the philosopher of science," and be lifeline to someone else's sanity.

### The Everyday Impact of Paradoxes

"She saw now that the strong impulses which had once wrecked her happiness were the forces that had enabled her to rebuild her life . . ." Ellen Glasgow, in *Barren Ground* (501).

"It was to her faults that she turned to save herself now." Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (501).

"The world of science lives fairly comfortably with paradox. We know that light is a wave, and also that light is a particle. The discoveries made in the infinitely small world of particle physics indicate randomness and chance, and I do not find it any more difficult to live with the paradox of a universe of randomness and chance and a

universe of pattern and purpose than I do with light as a wave and light as a particle. Living with contradiction is nothing new to the human being." Madeleine L'Engle in *Two Part Invention* (501).

"Contradiction itself, far from always being a criterion of error, is sometimes a sign of truth." Simone Weil, *Opression and Liberty* (137).

"[T]o light a candle is to cast a shadow." Ursula K. LeGuin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (502).

And, from other sources:

"The silence of midnight, to speak truly, though apparently a paradox, rung in my ears." Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, (qtd. in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.,)

"[T]here are rewards for accepting a position of inequality in society." Sara Slavin, *The Subordinated Sex* (275).

"[T]he terrible dilemma . . . also tortured me, and I suspect, many others: that art was worth experiencing, that the greatest art did not come from the purest minds, that the rich exploited the poor but at the same time made art possible." Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (B9).

"I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes." Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (27).

Hong Kingston provides a key to thinking usefully about paradox. Commonly we use the word, paradox, as if it highlighted "just a contradiction," which signals a need for more information so we can determine which of the paradoxical aspects is "true." Indeed, one of the contemporary uses of the term "paradox" is that it is a statement contrary to received opinion, as if it merely is the coexistence of two contradictory concepts. And when that is the case, efforts at finding 'what the facts are' make sense. Such efforts have been responsible for much progress, much change in women's lives, and will continue to be so. But in these cases the contradiction is apparent rather than real, and no actual paradox exists.

Paradox arises when the two contradictory elements that seemingly cancel each other out both have sufficient "truth" that neither can be dismissed. Then we must wrestle with situations where our fact finding merely confirms the contradictions. Take the case, "paradoxically, women's rights supporter, Arlen Spector, was among the most vicious in attacking Anita Hill." Spector has (and

does) strongly support women's rights legislation and causes; and he did viciously attack Anita Hill during the hearings on Clarence Thomas' nomination to the Supreme Court. The paradox arises because one would think a person who believed in women's rights, even if they had powerful reasons to question Hill's credibility, would do so in a manner respectful of Hill as a human being. Spector did not. Thus, we have reason to question his support for our causes and want to reject the truth of the first of these paradoxical claims. But in spite of the pressure of the whole heritage of Western thought that makes us want to, we cannot choose the "truth" of either element of this paradox.

In a real paradox both statements are "true," even as the adherence to one seems to require rejection of the other. As with Spector, we somehow have to accept both the "fact" of his support for women's rights and his malevolent treatment of a woman. We could, in fact, make a similar analysis of many persons' behaviors, for example, Linda's ex-husband who wanted her to look sexy but to not attract other men. The Spector case shows what Hong Kingston observed, and what poets have demonstrated for centuries: Bringing one's thought patterns to encompass contradictory "truths" enlarges the potential meanings embedded in any event and helps expand our consciousness.

Among the communication scholars who first worked on paradox was Linda Putnam. In a critique of current gender research published in 1982, she reiterated points she began making in the late 1970s, as she described the classic double bind for "professional" women in organizations where the role of manager has been defined almost exclusively in male-identified terms. Hence, she noted, women who do management must either be unfeminine or do management differently (read less well). She noted that "the typical response to a paradox is to avoid potentially threatening double binds or to become entrapped in a never ending spiral of self-fulfilling prophecies" (5). She called for more research into alternatives for understanding and coping with the paradoxes in our lives. Shortly thereafter, one such piece appeared.

Julia Wood and Robert Conrad published their now communication classic, "Paradox in the Experiences of Professional Women" in 1983. Wood and Conrad succinctly summarized the idea of the double bind in interpersonal relationships as introduced by Gregory Bateson and applied to interpersonal communication by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson. The double bind exists when people are in relationships of asymmetrical power, the subordinated one(s) receive(s) paradoxical messages from the dominant one(s) and the subordinated person(s) cannot "leave" the relationship.

Wood and Conrad then applied the concept to professional women, as Putnam had done, and analyzed the many paradoxes such women face in organizations. All these revolve around the primary issue that a woman

cannot "be a professional" without violating the accompanying necessity to "be a woman" (308). Their essay describes six recurrent paradoxes for "professional" women in organizations, but accurately points out that the paradox of powerlessness "directly or indirectly undergirds" all the others. Wood & Conrad do not fully examine how the idea of power and that of woman contradict, but the claim resonates and has contributed to the heuristic value of their essay in the intervening years. They describe three possible types of reactions to living with paradox, some that perpetuate the situation, others that redefine it, and still others that transcend it.

Perpetuating responses include acceptance (which might include alternating patterns of behavior such as Linda getting jobs and then quitting them), counter-disqualification, and withdrawal (such as Linda's obsession with suicide). Redefining responses include reframing, redirection, and confrontation. The idea of transcendent responses presented by Wood and Conrad relies heavily on Burke's concept of transcendence, and amounts to a suggestion to reconceptualize, to change how basic ideas are defined, how things are taken to "be." In the case of professional women, they suggest, such transcendence could occur if either gender (and hence the idea of woman) or the idea of professional were thought of differently. Given that thought and language patterns change slowly, we are not surprised that more than two decades after Putnam and others illuminated the paradoxes of professional lives for women we still felt a need for this special issue of *Women and Language*. There is, however, more to the matter than time, a point we discuss below, after we introduce one additional valuable book-length examination of the double binds facing women (one with a subtitle reminiscent of Putnam's).

In 1985, curiously including neither the Putnam paper nor that by Wood and Conrad in its bibliography, Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*, appeared. Jamieson drew on the work of Gregory Bateson as she identified double binds faced by women both professionally and personally through a long swath of western culture. She argued that the classic forms of most of these binds have been transcended, but recognized that the ghosts of some remain alive in contemporary culture. She emphasized the valuable idea that the binds can be placed on us not only by powerful others with whom we have relationships, but are also self-imposed because we internalize the injunctions of societal and cultural norms, thus echoing Kempton's "enemy with outposts in our heads." Jamieson identified a double bind as a situation where one is faced with two injunctions, seemingly related and opposite (which is the tie to the concept of paradox) but in which following either prescription creates a negative outcome. Using this description, she then names five such double binds that are part of western women's cultural heritage and in some ways remain present today. The binds she discusses are, reproduction or intellect; silence or shame; youth or

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helplessness; femininity or competence; and different (from men) or the same (16).

A fuller statement of each can make the paradoxical injunctions more clear: (1) Women can fulfill their biological functions (to reproduce) or they can fully develop their intellect. In the classic form, this was if you develop the brain you shrink the uterus; its modern ghost is that if you try to excel at a career outside the home you will neglect your parental duties. For example, Linda's husband wanted her to work outside the home and then said she was not a good wife and mother when she did so. (2) Women can (and should in the classic formulation) be silent, but in so doing they forfeit influence; in contrast women who choose not to remain silent risk shame (in the classic formulation) or behave like men (in the modern ghost form). Note Linda's husband was attracted to *and* embarrassed by her outspokenness. (3) To be old is to be invisible. Here Jamieson makes clear that some issues involve double standards because she demonstrates that aging for women is worse than it is for men. In its extreme form, this bind is not gendered. To be either very young or very old, even for men is, in western culture, to be without much influence; but clearly at either end of the age continuum, females face worse penalties than do males. (4) Women can be feminine, which is culturally considered weak. Thus, strong women are not feminine. (5) Women are different from men (in which case they are not capable of the same things as men); women are the same as men (in which case no differential treatment of women and men is justified). This final bind most clearly fits our discussion of paradox, as it may be the central conundrum of the contemporary feminist movement and the heart of the controversy surrounding standpoint analysis and equity feminism.

We report the extensive summary of Jamieson's work because she details how we can use communication and language to confront, and perhaps escape, these double binds. The several concepts she offers, while not particularly new, are powerful as a collection. And by contrasting her summary with our authors' work, we can see how the scholarship represented in this issue can work to transcend the binds.

Among the ideas Jamieson suggests is *reframing*, which Johnson offers in her analysis of the common phrase "working mothers." If production for use were defined as work, mothering becomes work and the term working mothers becomes redundant nonsense. Next Jamieson identifies *recovering and recounting*, or unearthing the buried knowledge about our female forebears and making sure stories of the lives of contemporary women are told. Chambers-Gordon does this with her story of women in a Jamaican spiritualist church. Ballard-Reisch, Turner, and Sarreata also do it by looking at the past, present, and future of women in Zimbabwe. Finally, Jamieson suggests *reclaiming and recasting* language as Jones & Mills show being done by Jewish feminists; and as may eventually happen with the



term “athlete” so that it includes women, even though, as Clasen and Shea clearly demonstrate, it now does not.

There is more in these articles, however, than discussions of surmounting double binds, and to make that point we want to draw a distinction too rarely noted. Paradoxes are logical conundrums, not susceptible to change by one’s actions; indeed they persist in spite of actions. Double binds result when people are (or feel they are) constrained to act within paradoxical frames and the outcome of any action is negative. Most often, as interactive phenomena resulting from either perceived or real paradoxes, double binds can be eliminated. Double binds, when imposed by others, depend on the relationship, and change (or go away) as the relationship changes. We do not mean to suggest such change is easy, but it can occur. Paradoxes, in contrast, do not go away depending on our behaviors.

We remain convinced the previous writing about paradoxes and double binds has not done what we wish to with this special issue of *Women and Language*—to reveal the power of seeing a paradox as what it is: the contemporaneous existence of contradictory “truths.” In part what we are hoping to do is to refocus how we see the concepts; we are suggesting a reconceptualization of the basic terms themselves. We believe that much of the generative power of paradox lies not in the unhealthy consequences that occur when communicators live surrounded by paradox (as we witnessed in Linda’s story), nor in the untruth of one or the other side of the proposition. It lies rather in the need to acknowledge that simultaneous and contradictory accuracy of both parts of the paradox.

Two fundamental conundrums of feminist movement reflect our claim: That woman is powerless (or less powerful than a paired idea of man) exists side by side with a contradictory fact that woman is powerful. That women are the same as men is true; as is the claim that women are different from men. Similarly, as Herndon shows, 12-step groups empower members even as they encourage the members to embrace being powerless. And, as Charlesworth demonstrates, menstruation literature both dis-empowers and empowers teenage girls. Other authors point to similar contradictory conclusions. Two articles, one by Clasen and the other by Shea, note how we have women athletes even as the paradigmatic athlete is male, hence the paradoxical conception of female athlete. Edley shows how technology liberates employed women even as it simultaneously provides the vehicle for corporate colonization of women’s private lives. Boswell helps us to better understand how dis-abilities constitute both weakness and strength.

The essays in this volume, taken together, contribute insight into the many levels of interacting meaning that exist when humans communicate within paradoxical constructions. Rather than treating double binds and paradox as the same phenomena, more usefully we distinguish them from each other. Cumulatively, the essays

show that when faced with a “true” paradox (that is one in which neither of the propositions is demonstrably false) a productive, creative and (yes) rational response is to embrace it. This means to replace the “either/or” orientation with “both/and.” That is, while sometimes it seems necessary and logical to seek to falsify one alternative in a paradox, we often gain, even make our minds large, when we recognize and embrace the “truth” of both seemingly contradictory positions. Our authors show that recognizing (and acting upon) contradictory truths can open new understandings of women’s experiences and communication, as well as much communication about women.

Dealing with matters of gender and of language heightens the importance of seeing the “mind enlarging” function of paradox recognized, since paradox inheres in both concepts. With regard to gender, humans “are” both masculine and feminine; male and female are alike AND they are different. Recognizing this basic paradox of gender helps enlarge the mind sufficiently to cope with the complexities of gender as identity, as attribution, as performance, and as a constantly changing entity that emerges from relationship. Similarly, language is inherently paradoxical. It both creates and reflects reality. Words are merely vibrations of air or marks on stone or paper or in some nebulous cyberspace medium; and words also are the most powerful of tools. Language IS both symbol and reality.

When we cannot hold such contradictory truths in our minds, the result can be immobilizing, yes, even suicide-inducing. Multi-layered paradoxes and double binds can create untenable positions in which one cannot exist for long periods of time without some personal, professional, or emotional consequences, many of which are discussed in the articles that follow. However, when we can simultaneously see and hold dozens of contradictory truths in our minds, we are better equipped to understand, use, and live with them all.

## Notes

- 1 Cambridge dictionaries online, *Cambridge University Press* 2000  
Cambridge University Press online, August 2001.  
[http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=paradox\\*1+0](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=paradox*1+0)

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