

ANXIETY, PROCESSES, AND DIFFERENCE
“I’M RIGHT, YOU’RE WRONG”

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George Bateson wrote in “From Versailles to Cybernetics,” a chapter in *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*, about the impact on the world’s future events when a quality of thinking or attitude is inserted and becomes a part of the thinking process of the culture, which then guides one’s assumptions and perceptions about the world one lives in.* A quality of our thinking that permeates much of our thinking and behavior is “either/or” dichotomies. It can be subtle or it can be blatant. The world becomes divided into good guys/bad guys. This thinking permeates religions, cultures, and immigration policies. In relationships the behavior and thinking is one is right, the other is wrong. The other needs to and should change. This way of thinking surfaces in clinical settings: physician versus non-medical therapists, patients versus families, hospital staff versus patients. Differences (in whatever context) can become alienating. Inclusiveness is not part of the brain’s “bias,” to use Bateson’s metaphor.

This thinking characteristic may have been a part since the beginning of time, necessitated by biological survival forces. It was important to be able to make the distinction between external potential threats (the enemy) and family and “friends.” Likewise, it is important for the individual’s immune system to have the capacity to make a distinction between self and non-self. Failures in this capacity can be life-threatening if the “either/or” distinctions are not made.

These processes of anxiety, external forces, and escalation play out in the larger worlds in which all people live. How these processes are managed impact on the survival of the societies that make up our world.

Dr. Bowen’s letter of July 1980 is a response to a letter from a colleague who had written him about “rabble rousing feminists.” He speaks of connections between anxiety, escalation, and “regression” in society.

*Bateson was speaking specifically of the impact of “deceit” becoming a built in part of one’s way of doing business.

July 14, 1980

Dear

I wish I had plenty of time like you to write all those great letters. I liked your piece on "Rabble Rousing Feminists" in the current AMNews.

APA has had a problem with ERA and conventions in non-ERA states. In 1978 there was stuff about the meeting in Atlanta, non-ERA. This led to a referendum of the total membership, anticipating New Orleans 1981. The membership approved New Orleans. The APA now has about 25,000 members.

was the most vocal of the several radical types doing demonstrations. They started early and continued late. One morning I was awakened by with a bull horn holding a rally of her troops on the street alongside the S.F. Hilton. has a past record on equal rights stuff. He sort of cozied up to . Then, with chairing the meeting, the Bd of Trustees (about 18 with representative of all the district branches) voted to change the 1981 mtg from New Orleans to Anaheim.

A lot of members who voted for N.O in the referendum last year were sort of angry that a small Bd of Trustees would presume to cancel a referendum. Then our APA lawyer got into it. He is also our lawyer for my small Amer Fam Th Assoc and I have come to know him well. He said the Bd of Trustees was not only out of order but ILLEGAL in reversing a referendum, that the APA would become the object of a multimillion dollar damage suit by N.O., and that he did not want the job of trying to defend the APA in a suit in which the APA was clearly illegal. Much turmoil and many red faces in the APA hierarchy. The decision was quickly reversed and now New Orleans is ON. Companion organizations such as the Amer Psychoanalytic are meeting in Houston. For 25 yrs the companion organizations have met in the same city a few days before the APA.

Another recent story from a small society of Animal Biologists, meeting in Ft Collins, Colo. Their 400 or so members meet on college campuses where they can get low cost dorm rooms and cafeteria food. A year ago they voted non-ERA. This year one of the impassioned ones wangled another vote on the same issue. The chairman permitted another vote which went non-ERA by about 52%.

The meeting droned on into the lunch hour and people began walking out to go to lunch. At the very end of the meeting the passionate radical wangled another motion for an ERA vote, the Chairman let him get away with it, and the group finally passed a pro-ERA vote. This is the degree to which the radical ones brow beat the more stable majority into instability. I think it is a beautiful example of the step by step process that operates in families as a delinquency prone youngster starts working on his family and the unsure family give in to settle the argument.

Since the early 1970's I have been writing about this as "Societal Regression." I have postulated the whole thing to be the product of increasing societal anxiety which results in the radical ones becoming more persistent and the more stable ones less sure of themselves. I have postulated the increasing anxiety to the product of population explosion and a decrease in world raw materials necessary for the human to continue his way of life on the planet. In a more normal society, the regression and progression cycles pretty much balance each other. Since 1965 our periods of progression have been brief and regressions have been long and serious. I do not see how societal anxiety can decrease until society goes thru a major crisis and I think our society is still resilient enough for us to avoid a major-major crisis for perhaps another two generations. The pattern of this is very clear in families and smaller social groups. Regression is turned around with a clearly defined leader who can take a calm stand without shouting or taking revolutionary postures. Regression can be turned around if the total anxiety subsides but our society is not about to take such steps as long as we can have our cake and eat it too. When the regressive element goes above 50%, there is no way a democratic form of govt can reverse the trend. The Supreme Court is now making more regressive decisions than progressive ones. And so goeth the world.

Did not intend to get into this when I started the short note. I think you get too much passion into countering the passion of the radical forces.

Have to go. Many memories of the visit on March 1 last Spring. Thanks for doing the letter that stimulated this response.

For now,