

THE STRUCTURE of MAGIC



A Book
About
Language
& Therapy

by Richard Bandler & John Grinder

INTRODUCTIONS by

VIRGINIA SATIR & GREGORY BATESON

THE STRUCTURE OF MAGIC I

A Book about Language
and Therapy

By
RICHARD BANDLER
and
JOHN GRINDER

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FOREWORD

WOW! What could anyone say about having their work looked at by four fine eyes in the heads of two very capable human researchers? This book is the outcome of the efforts of two intriguing, smart, young men who are interested in finding out how change takes place and in documenting the process. They seem to have come up with a description of the predictable elements that make change happen in a transaction between two people. Knowing what these elements are makes it possible to use them consciously and, thus, to have useful methods for inducing change.

I often say to people that I have a right to be a slow learner but educable. What this means to me as a therapist is that I have only one thought — to help the people who come to me in pain to make changes in their lives. How I use my body, my voice, my eyes, my hands, in addition to the words and the way I use words, is my only tool. Since my goal is to make change possible for everyone, every someone offers a new challenge.

Looking back, I see that, although I was aware that change was happening, I was unaware of the specific elements that went into the transaction which made change possible. For years, I wondered what it would be like to be on the other end of me, to view myself working, to view the process of change from the other side. The authors spent hours looking at video tapes and listening to audio material, and they found patterns emerging which they could document. I do something, I feel it, I see it, my gut responds to it — that is a subjective experience. When I do it with someone

else, their eyes, ears, body sense these things. What Richard Bandler and John Grinder have done is to watch the process of change over a time and to distill from it the patterns of the *how* process. What they learned relates particularly, in a sophisticated way, to mathematics, physics, neurology and linguistics.

It would be hard for me to write this Foreword without my own feeling of excitement, amazement and thrill coming through. I have been a teacher of family therapy for a long time, as well as a clinician and a theoretician. This means that I have seen change taking place in many families, and I have been involved in training many family therapists. I have a theory about *how* I make change occur. The knowledge of the process is now considerably advanced by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, who can talk in a way that can be concretized and measured about the ingredients of the *what* that goes into making the *how* possible.

Virginia M. Satir

INTRODUCTION

It is a strange pleasure to write an introduction for this book because John Grinder and Richard Bandler have done something similar to what my colleagues and I attempted fifteen years ago.

The task was easy to define: to create the beginnings of an appropriate theoretical base for the describing of human interaction.

The difficulty lay in the word "appropriate" and in the fact that what was to be described included not only the event sequences of successful communication but also the patterns of misunderstanding and the pathogenic.

The behavioral sciences, and especially psychiatry, have always avoided theory, and it is easy to make a list of the various maneuvers whereby theory could be avoided: the historians (and some anthropologists) chose the impossible task of making not *theory* but more *data* out of what was known — a task for detectives and courts of law. The sociologists trimmed the complex variations of known fact to such an ultimate simplicity that the clipped nuggets could be counted. Economists believed in transitive preference. Psychologists accepted all sorts of internal explanatory entities (ego, anxiety, aggression, instinct, conflict, etc.) in a way reminiscent of medieval psycho-theology.

Psychiatrists dabbled in all these methods of explanation; they searched for narratives of childhood to explain current behavior, making new data out of what was known. They attempted to create statistical samples of morbidity. They wallowed in internal and mythical entities, *ids* and archetypes. Above all, they

borrowed the concepts of physics and mechanics — energy, tension, and the like — to create a scientism.

But there were a few beginnings from which to work: the “logical types” of Russell and Whitehead, the “Games Theory” of Von Neumann, the notions of comparable form (called “homology” by biologists), the concepts of “levels” in linguistics, Von Domarus’ analysis of “schizophrenic” syllogisms, the notion of discontinuity in genetics and the related notion of binary information. Pattern and redundancy were beginning to be defined. And, above all, there was the idea of homeostasis and self-correction in cybernetics.

Out of these scattered pieces came a hierarchic classification of orders of message and (therefore) of orders of learning, the beginnings of a theory of “schizophrenia” and with it an attempt, very premature, to classify the ways in which people and animals code their messages (digital, analogic, iconic, kinesic, verbal, etc.).

Perhaps our greatest handicap at that time was the difficulty which the professionals seemed to experience when they tried to understand what we were doing. Some even tried to count “double binds” in recorded conversations. I treasure somewhere in my files a letter from a funding agency telling me that my work should be more clinical, more experimental, and, above all, more quantitative.

Grinder and Bandler have confronted the problems which we confronted then and this series is the result. They have tools which we did not have — or did not see how to use. They have succeeded in making linguistics into a base for theory and simultaneously into a tool for therapy. This gives them a double control over the psychiatric phenomena, and they have done something which, as I see it today, we were foolish to miss.

We already knew that most of the premises of individual psychology were useless, and we knew that we ought to classify modes of communicating. But it never occurred to us to ask about the effects of the modes upon interpersonal relations. In this first volume, Grinder and Bandler have succeeded in making explicit the syntax of how people avoid change and, therefore, how to assist them in changing. Here they focus on verbal communication. In the second volume, they develop a general model of communication and change involving the other modes of communication which human beings use to represent and communicate their experience. What happens when messages in digital mode are flung at an analog thinker? Or when visual presentations are offered to an auditory client?

We did not see that these various ways of coding — visual,

auditory, etc. — are so far apart, so mutually different even in neurophysiological representation, that no material in one mode can ever be of the same logical type as any material in any other mode.

This discovery seems obvious when the argument starts from linguistics, as in the first volume of the present series, instead of starting from culture contrast and psychosis, as we did.

But, indeed, much that was so difficult to say in 1955 is strikingly easier to say in 1975.

May it be heard!

Gregory Bateson

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Preface

Down through the ages the power and wonder of practitioners of magic have been recorded in song and story. The presence of wizards, witches, sorcerers, shamen, and gurus has always been intriguing and awe inspiring to the average person. These people of power, wrapped in a cloak of secrecy, presented a striking contradiction to the common ways of dealing with the world. The spells and incantations they wove were feared beyond belief and, at the same time, sought constantly for the help they could provide. Whenever these people of power publicly performed their wonders, they would both shatter the concepts of reality of that time and place and present themselves as having something that was beyond learning. In modern time, the mantle of the wizard is most often placed upon those dynamic practitioners of psychotherapy who exceed the skill of other therapists by leaps and bounds, and whose work is so amazing to watch that it moves us with powerful emotions, disbelief, and utter confusion. Just as with all wizards of the ages of the earth whose knowledge was treasured and passed down from sage to sage — losing and adding pieces but retaining a basic structure — so, too, does the magic of these therapeutic wizards also have structure.

The Prince and the Magician

Once upon a time there was a young prince who believed in all things but three. He did not believe in princesses, he did not believe in islands, he did not believe in God. His father, the king, told him that such things did not exist. As there were no prin-

cesses or islands in his father's domains, and no sign of God, the prince believed his father.

But then, one day, the prince ran away from his palace and came to the next land. There, to his astonishment, from every coast he saw islands, and on these islands, strange and troubling creatures whom he dared not name. As he was searching for a boat, a man in full evening dress approached him along the shore.

"Are those real islands?" asked the young prince.

"Of course they are real islands," said the man in evening dress.

"And those strange and troubling creatures?"

"They are all genuine and authentic princesses."

"Then God must also exist!" cried the prince.

"I am God," replied the man in evening dress, with a bow.

The young prince returned home as quickly as he could.

"So, you are back," said his father, the king.

"I have seen islands, I have seen princesses, I have seen God," said the prince reproachfully.

The king was unmoved.

"Neither real islands, nor real princesses, nor a real God exist."

"I saw them!"

"Tell me how God was dressed."

"God was in full evening dress."

"Were the sleeves of his coat rolled back?"

The prince remembered that they had been. The king smiled.

"That is the uniform of a magician. You have been deceived."

At this, the prince returned to the next land and went to the same shore, where once again he came upon the man in full evening dress.

"My father, the king, has told me who you are," said the prince indignantly. "You deceived me last time, but not again. Now I know that those are not real islands and real princesses, because you are a magician."

The man on the shore smiled.

"It is you who are deceived, my boy. In your father's kingdom, there are many islands and many princesses. But you are under your father's spell, so you cannot see them."

The prince pensively returned home. When he saw his father, he looked him in the eye.

"Father, is it true that you are not a real king, but only a magician?"

The king smiled and rolled back his sleeves.

"Yes, my son, I'm only a magician."

"Then the man on the other shore was God."

"The man on the other shore was another magician."

"I must know the truth, the truth beyond magic."

"There is no truth beyond magic," said the king.

The prince was full of sadness. He said, "I will kill myself."

The king by magic caused death to appear. Death stood in the door and beckoned to the prince. The prince shuddered. He remembered the beautiful but unreal islands and the unreal but beautiful princesses.

"Very well," he said, "I can bear it."

"You see, my son," said the king, "you, too, now begin to be a magician."

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Warning to the Reader

The central task of psychology, whether experimental or applied, is the understanding of human behavior. Human behavior is extremely complex. To say, however, that our behavior is complex is not to deny that it has structure. In general, modern psychology has attempted to understand human behavior by breaking it down into relatively separate areas of study — for example, the areas of perception, of learning, of language behavior, of motor skills. As our understanding of each of these areas grows, we continue to uncover the structure of the human behavior being described — to find that human behavior is rule governed.

To say that human behavior is rule governed is not to say that we can understand it in simple stimulus-response terms. In the study of human languages, for example, the kind of rules required to describe this behavior is beyond the capabilities of S-R theories (Chomsky, 1957). It is useful for an adequate understanding of this book that you distinguish between rule-governed behavior and determined behavior.

Continuing with the example of human languages, the number of possible sentences in each human language (e.g., English, Spanish, etc.) is infinite. In other words, the number of verbal descriptions of human experiences is limitless. At the same time, the number of forms (syntax) in which this infinite set of meanings is represented is highly restricted — has structure — and, therefore, may be described by a set of rules. This sequence of words is an English sentence. It has structure, as can be demon-

strated by considering the result of reversing the order of words:

Sentence English an is words of sequence this.

Similarly, in the case of other types of complex human behavior, there is an infinite number of distinct acts. The form of these acts will have structure — and, therefore, will be describable by some set of rules. To say that human behavior is describable by some set of rules is not to warrant that our behavior is determined or predictable.

The most sophisticated study of human, rule-governed behavior is the study of human language systems. Specifically, a group of linguists known as transformational grammarians has developed a set of rules describing the forms which we use to represent and communicate our experience with language. Although transformational grammar is a young discipline (initiated in 1955), it has already had a profound effect on experimental psychology, especially modern learning theory. It has yet to have an impact on applied psychology. This book is designed to make the insights of transformational grammar available and usable to those people who work with complex human behavior.

There are three important pieces of information in addition to the above background which we want you to have as you begin this book:

1. What's in the book;
2. How to use the book;
3. What you can expect to gain from using the book.

1. What's in the Book

This book is designed to give you an explicit set of tools which will help you to become a more effective therapist. Chapter 1 shows that we do not operate directly on the world in which we live, but rather that we create models or maps of the world and use these maps to guide our behavior. Further, it states that effective therapy implies some change in the way that a client represents his experience.

Chapter 2 shows you the structure of one specific way human beings represent their experiences — human language systems. Chapter 3 presents a way of using the structure of language systems as a set of tools for operating in therapy. These tools are compatible with every form of psychotherapy of which we are aware. Chapter 4 presents a step-by-step procedure for learning and using these tools. Chapter 5 is composed of two transcripts with commentary showing the use of these tools in therapy. Chapter 6 integrates these tools with a number of well-known, non-verbal techniques from already established forms of psychotherapy.

2. How to Use this Book

This book is not a novel, and we recommend that you not attempt to read it as you would a novel. This book is a manual to teach you a set of tools which will increase your effectiveness as a therapist. As with any manual, it should be read and reread.

To begin this learning process for yourself, a general overall understanding of Chapters 1, 2, and 3 is adequate. Naturally, the more thoroughly you understand these chapters, the more effectively you will be able to apply the specific techniques presented in Chapter 4.

When you reach Chapter 4, slow down. This chapter consists of a set of step-by-step instructions to give you practice in the use of the techniques. Since this book, the first of a series, is primarily concerned with verbal techniques, most of the techniques are questions based on the *form* of the client's communication in therapy. Each of the techniques presented in Chapter 4 should be studied by itself in order to give you the optimum skill to increase your effectiveness as a therapist. Each of these techniques has at least one step-by-step exercise. To acquire these skills, you must practice them — USE THE EXERCISES.

Chapter 5 is *not* an example of what we regard as powerful therapy. Chapter 5 is designed to show you how the various techniques work in conjunction with one another. Read through the transcript with its commentary, paying attention to the choices that the therapist has and the flow of the verbal exchange between the therapist and the client. You may also wish to cover the commentary and to consider each of the client's sentences in turn, to determine whether you can identify all of the choices each of these sentences presents to you as a therapist.

Read through Chapter 6 carefully — its purpose is to teach you to use Chapter 4 techniques to identify the appropriateness of some of the better known, non-verbal techniques. If any of the non-verbal techniques presented in this chapter are techniques in which you are already trained, use them as a reference point to integrate other techniques which you find useful in your therapy. If none of your specific techniques is presented, pay particular attention to which of the Chapter 4 techniques you are using in therapy when you become aware of an appropriate place for you to employ one of your own specific techniques. This will begin the process of integration of the tools presented in this manual with your own style of therapy.

3. What You Can Expect to Gain from Using this Book

Using this book in the way we suggest will make you a more