

The Concept of Boundaries



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The Concept of Boundaries – how they work in therapy.

The Chambers Twentieth Century dictionary offers us a rather negative explanation of the word boundary, telling us that it means a hindrance or impediment to a person moving from place to place; better I think is their meaning for bound – ‘the limit of that which is reasonable and permitted’.

We all struggle with from the moment we are born to make order from chaos. The ways in which we establish and perceive boundaries helps us make sense of what happens to us in life. Knowing where one thing finishes and another begins, is to recognize a boundary, de Board (1986 p.116) tells us that: “The effectiveness of the individual lies in knowing the boundary between self and the outside world, and in perceiving what is inside and what is outside. Projection blurs the boundary, distances reality making what is inside appear outside ... actions are based on unreality and facts are distorted.”

Establishing a boundary means setting a limit or recognizing someone else's limit, and it is here that individuals and groups experience the fear of hurting or being hurt by another. Ellen Noonan (1983) describes how in individual therapy the a

bounded time and space which she safeguards from all intrusions, enabling the patient to feel secure enough to lay aside his normal ways of coping in the outside world and providing the freedom for him to experiment with his own boundaries and get a different perspective on his feelings. The counsellor does this by offering a neutral setting for the sessions and by being secure and consistent about maintaining her own professional and personal boundaries.

Settling territorial boundaries is often the cause of conflict and in the animal kingdom much energy is spent evolved a complicated series of rituals and ways of behaving that allow roles to be defined and boundaries to be drawn without actual bloodshed. Unfortunately this is not always true in human society. However once boundaries are laid down, defences become relaxed, anxiety is minimised and culture and goods can begin to flow back and forth.

In the classical theory of organizations and how they work, the raw materials or information is imported across the boundary of the office or factory where it is transformed into useful goods and or services, in which form it is sent back out again across the boundary to be sold or offered to customers. So here we see that boundaries are exciting challenging places - in a sense work takes place at the boundary.

Menzies Lyth (1988, p.242) offers us a comparable explanation of how successful boundaries work in individuals: "An aspect of healthy development in the individual is the establishment of a firm boundary for the self and others across which realistic and effective relationships and transactions can take place and within which a sense of ones own identity can be established."

In individual counselling much of the work involves enabling the client to recognize their own personal boundaries and to take back their projected painful feeling across the boundary of self and other. I think there are comparisons to be made with the consistent, secure and in a sense bounded framework of the working alliance, which is an essential part of effective therapy and a well structured staffing system where roles are clear and the staff feel trained and supported enough to act at the boundary of their task.