

Circle Diagram: a visual aid to therapy

David Waite applies the skills learned in his original profession as engineer to his new role as a counsellor

Question: What does an engineer do when he becomes a counsellor?

Answer: He draws diagrams.

My first profession was in engineering. I loved designing devices and processes to overcome difficult problems. I also loved working with project teams to translate those designs into reality. I still enjoy that now. In parallel to this, I was navigating 'Project Me' through its own life journey. When I decided to stop the engineering, I felt drawn towards making use of what I had learnt in my life to help others. Counselling became an obvious route, if I could achieve it. I saw that I could use a lot of what I had learnt, but that I needed to find effective methods to apply it.

My whole career and *modus operandi* had been about persistent action, but now I had to learn that, as an integrated person-centred counsellor, doing nothing was often going to be the best strategy. It was unlikely that I would discover very quickly what a client's potential was going to look like or how they might get there, so I was not there to tell them the way; I was there to help them find their own way. I am still amazed by the effectiveness of this method and am still delighted when I see clients rising from the ashes of their existences, often with minimal input from me.

So I approached the issue of intervention with some caution. Sand tray work, stones and drawings seemed to me to stray from the person-centred ethos. But then I felt that, provided I adhered to Rogerian principles, I should be offering clients whatever tools I had to help them find their true selves. In the particular instance of children or clients with special needs whose vocabulary may be limited – indeed, with any clients with a limited emotional vocabulary – the use of an external reference could help them

process and convey their feelings and could therefore be really useful.

Sunderland suggests, in her beautifully clear book *Draw on your Emotions*, that 'many people could... recover from the pain they have suffered if they could just somehow describe it... Sometimes with the help of pictures people are able to describe feelings where they may not have been able to talk them out'.¹ Pictorial expression was never my forte, but I have spent much of my life transmitting information in diagrammatic form. In this way I could explain extremely sophisticated engineering concepts and details to fellow engineers whom I might never meet and whose first language I didn't share. Such is the efficacy of the diagram.

A simple circle

I take courage from Colin Feltham's article in *Therapy Today*, 'What ever happened to critical thinking?', in which he seems frustrated with a general reluctance to challenge old thinking with new ideas.² My engineering penchant is mainly in design, so new ideas are my stock in trade. I had picked up some concepts from supervisors, so as I began my own practice and felt freer to give more to my clients, I began to offer them a simple circle as a means to help them express themselves more comfortably to me. I wanted to establish a relationship in which I was working alongside them to find out how the person inside was managing, or not managing the lot that life had dealt them at this stage. I wanted to team up with my client on their project of finding a better way for them to conduct their life.

By drawing a simple circle on a piece of paper and saying that represented me, them or anyone else – but can we make this 'you'? – I helped clients to be objective about their issues, thereby

reducing the difficulties of 'confessing themselves' to someone else. It was factually objective rather than embarrassingly subjective. Many clients seem to find it useful, so I continue to offer it as and when needed. It is there for them if they want it. I see helping the client to look objectively at him or herself as a really useful function in itself. However, what is more interesting is how discussions with clients have developed this simple shape. Many of us would agree that we learn most of what we know from our clients. This has proved no exception.

As the use of the diagram expanded, I wondered whether I should give it a therapy-related title. However I decided to stick with my original 'Circle Diagram' because I wanted it to be what the client made of it rather than injecting any of my own concepts into it from the start. Better to be unimaginative than risk biasing the tool I was offering.

As part of my contracting, I describe the therapeutic model I use so they will know what is on offer and what is not. I tell them that Rogers believed that within everyone is the tendency to find the healing we need and we just have to find it.³ I propose that this capacity resides at the core of their being, and can be depicted as the centre of the circle. Our job is to find out together how to access it. In this way they can see that:

1. this task may be possible, so they have new hope
2. they are not on their own
3. this is not 'me treating you' – it is 'me helping you'
4. we have a visual focus to work on.

The development of the diagram then becomes a participation in the process of problem resolution – one that is within them, not external to them, as they may have thought before. So we have a simple circle with a little circle in the middle

‘I see my job as walking with my client into those unpleasant places where they would otherwise be too scared to venture and allowing them to experience a peace there’

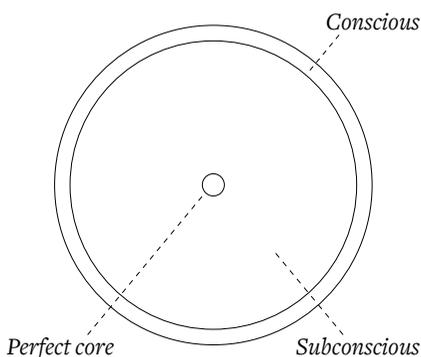
representing the core of the self, the source of the perfect being they were meant to be before things went awry.

At some time we inevitably talk about what they are able to manage in their conscious processes on the one hand and, on the other, what seems to be out of their control. I see much of my job as helping clients understand the emotional world within them – a world that seems to drive them to keep doing things they regret or that just makes them feel horrible one way or another. I want to help them develop their emotional intelligence. So it’s good to differentiate between the conscious mind and the rest of the human functioning. I call that other part ‘subconscious’, and clients seem to relate readily to that. I wanted to avoid the word ‘unconscious’, which is used in the field of psychoanalysis.

The circles explained

A thin annulus round the existing circle represents the conscious mind (see figure 1). Clients generally agree that what we can consciously understand is very small in comparison with all the information the human system processes. This annulus functions as the interface between our inner

Figure 1



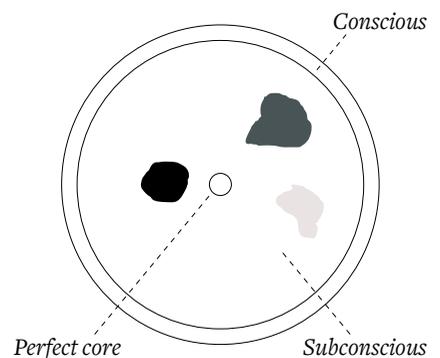
subconscious self and the external world we perceive. It receives incoming information, which it then passes to the ‘subconscious’ self, where it is processed in either a fruitful or a destructive way. The response comes back to the conscious annulus and we react from that area accordingly. So we might then have another drink to dilute the anxiety a bit more or we might do something more altruistic – like help an old lady with her shopping.

So why do we have different responses? Most of my clients who took another drink would have preferred to have been able to help the old lady. I am not sure any of them would have truly wanted the reverse. Why are we not the perfectly happy people we might have been? The answers are normally that we were not treated perfectly when we were growing up, or even later, as adults. Rogers refers to this in his Proposition 14 as ‘psychological maladjustment’.⁴ Bad things happened to us. So then we add black blobs in the circle to show the damage we have sustained (figure 2).

Some blobs are bigger than others. Some are blacker. Some took place early in life, so those go near the centre. Some are more recent and are toward the outside. I don’t find the need to persuade the client to identify their blobs at the time, but I do suggest they can take the diagram away with them to consider before we meet for our next session.

So what can we do with these blobs that are stopping us enjoying life properly? They are our memories, but it’s not the memory per se that hinders us; it’s the emotions attached to the memory. We recognise that memories themselves cannot be expunged, but they can be normalised so that they no longer poison how we feel or how we act. I see my job as walking with my client into those unpleasant places where they

Figure 2



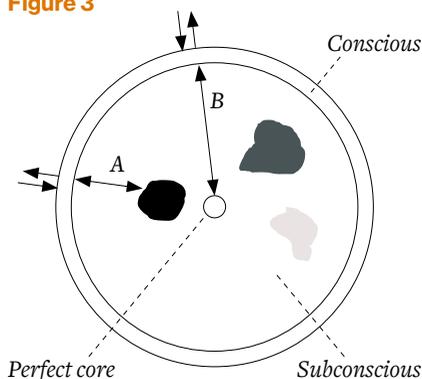
would otherwise be too scared to venture and allowing them to experience a peace there, rather than the fear they previously felt. The black blobs then start to grey off a bit. We have started a process of healing. ‘Project Client’ is now under way.

Clients also find the blobs useful in helping to explain moods and actions. They experience their external world through their senses. Our outer ‘conscious’ annulus is where we sense events. We have some control there. These experiences then enter into the subconscious area where there seems to be much less control. So, if an incoming experience relates to a previous experience identified by one of their blobs, they see that their reaction would probably replicate their original response, however inappropriate it might be now. This can be depicted by a line of thought, A, coming through the conscious annulus, into the subconscious area and hitting a blob, thereby stimulating an old and negative response (figure 3).

If, however, an experience did not correspond to a black blob, then their response might be a wholesome one. This could be represented by the line entering as before, but accessing the

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Figure 3



perfect core at the centre, B. That way the response is positive and desirable. Clients seem to work well with this depiction, especially if they have sought resolution to their issues externally but that has failed. **They now have a new route to try, and this time the route is inside them.**

The perfect core

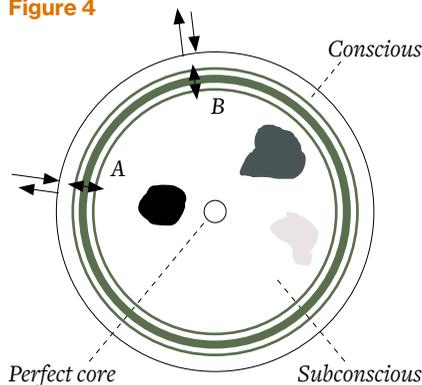
It seems natural that this central core would be the source of the perfect being they were meant to be before all those black blobs emerged in their life. It is a grounding point, a place of peace. That is a powerful concept for those with low self-esteem, for a number of reasons. **They see that they are not all bad; that all of their ills are not of their own making; that they might be truly beautiful and desirable inside, and that change is available and possible.**

Almost by that set of premises alone, this perfect core could be seen as a powerful source that could change their lives for the better. And it will need to be powerful if it is to overcome the issues they have faced and failed to defeat by themselves, often despite enormous effort. And the promise is good because I see clients identify with this model and improve in themselves. It seems to

provide a template upon which they can construct a working model of themselves that they can readily comprehend. It helps them untangle the mess of their emotional lives and discern the important from the superfluous.

The use of the diagram seems almost endless. With one client a mushy line was drawn round the inside of the conscious annulus, purporting to describe how medication was insulating the subconscious from the impacts of the experiences of the world (figure 4). The medication reduced the negative reactions to events like A, but also numbed the joy of touching the central core of their being via B. They saw it as an inhibition both to developing those healthy responses and also to healing the damaged memories.

Figure 4



Another observation was that a blob near the middle, representing damage in early life, had more impact than one near the edge, being more recent. It cast a greater shadow. For its size, it prevented more experiences from reaching the core and returning a wholesome response.

For me, the beauty of this diagram is its simplicity, which prevents me putting my own personality into it. It can be a blank canvas on which a client can build

a model of their emotional self. That depiction outside of themselves enables them to discuss their inner world with a neutral figure, the counsellor. I feel it is more acceptable and less prescriptive than some of the more conventional pictorial tools that have been developed, albeit mainly for the younger client.

I have avoided technical language in this article and that reflects my counselling style. This is about what the client is saying and how they understand and talk about themselves. While much of what has developed has been client driven, I recognise clients will not generate all these ideas from the beginning. Accordingly, I offer some basic ideas for them to build on, always with the objective of helping them express themselves. At the same time I continue to remain wary of introducing my own values into their thought processes.

I hope that readers feel able to let the Circle Diagram help their clients find a way through the confusion of their inner lives a little better. ■

David Waite retired from his profession of engineering and felt called to work with people rather than projects. He has a master's degree in counselling and has worked with a broad spectrum of clients. He teaches meditation. Feedback is welcomed to waite@davidmalcolm.co.uk

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