

Polarities and Wholeness

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A condensed and textual version of an AHPP workshop on Working with Polarities in Counselling, held on 29 April 2000.

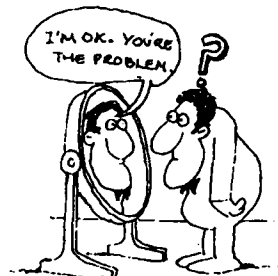


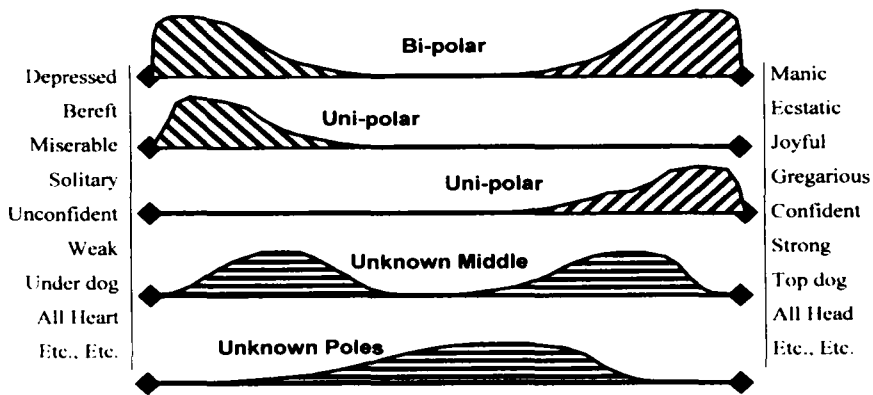
Nothing here is new, this is not yet another therapy model, but some ideas, techniques and approaches drawn from others which I'd like to share. Concepts of the continuum and its polarities work powerfully for me as a person and they seem to work for my clients (sometimes). Although valuable for therapeutic work, polarities are also a powerful means of self-exploration and symbolic representation of inner states. They make overt the splits and limitations within ourselves and out in the world, leading to self understanding and resolution of dilemmas, impasses, conflicting choices and disputes between couples. Their symbolic representation can be created by means of guided imagining; or using art materials, clay, sound, and body posture; or simply being different 'selves' at opposite ends of the sofa.

The most obvious example of polarised behaviour is the manic-depressive, but all therapists see clients who are polarised or restricted in some respects. Either feelings and behaviour can be at one extreme or another but rarely in the middle ground, such as being very submissive then flipping into violent rage; or in having a very limited range of emotions, such as always being outwardly content, never expressing great joy nor deep sadness. Or we may be stuck in one state and never experience the flip side. Sometimes these are inner states rather than overt behaviour. In all cases the aim of therapy, being directed towards healthy functioning, is

that a full range or continuum of emotions and behaviours be available to the client.

Although this approach works easily within a Gestalt context it is found in many orientations, such as the TA concept of the Controlling Parent and the Adaptive Child. In couple or family work it may be the roles adopted by each party. Or Topdog at the office, Lapdog at home. In body therapy being head and gut focused with no heart centre. Behaviourally it's 'Why don't you? Yes, but...' It even echo's Freud's Id and Superego.





Polarity Experiments

To gain a flavour of working with polarities, try the following experiments. As a Gestaltist, I prefer 'experiments' to 'exercises', as the latter seems more remote and has shades (for me) of punitive, marked and graded school work, while experiments were messy, creative and fun. These experiments progress from your external world into relationships, then into your internal world. In each two polarities are brought together to find a middle path or way that is more than compromise. Visualisation, sound, speech, posture and facial expression are all employed to bring feelings to the surface, make them concrete, where they can be seen, explored, and in a therapeutic setting talked about.

An external polarity

Sit upright, back straight, feet firmly on the ground, hands on your knees, palms open and upward. Close your eyes and check your body for tension and stresses and gently release them. Take several deep slow breaths. Keeping your eyes closed, remember

or imagine two opposite situations out there in the world, Summer and Winter; Hard Job and Nice Job; Peaceful Place and Noisy Crowd; etc. But not, for the moment, involving yourself and another person. Now, 'place' one polarity in one of your palms and the opposite polarity in the other, as though they were objects. Consider each in turn: - How heavy? What colour, plain or multi-hued? Rough or smooth or sharp? Hard or soft, springy or pliable? Wet/Dry? Cold/Warm? (For example, the peaceful place may be light, warm, soft, moist and golden. The noisy crowd may have weight, be hard and sharp, dry or overwhelmingly wet like a storm.) Feel the weight, texture and temperature, let your fingers explore it. See its colour: dull, shiny, glowing or absorbing? If each polarity had a sound, what would it be? If each had a speech bubble, what would it say? Let attention rest on one polarity for a while and experience it; then on the other. What are they telling you?

Now bring your hands together, let your fingers mingle and intertwine. Can you find or create a middle way, a third point, taking elements from both polarities but which is more than a mere

compromise or average. (For example, rather than Spring or Autumn being the mid-point of Summer/Winter, what about a warm sunny day with a cold wind? Or for the Peaceful Place/Noisy Crowd, rather than a smaller quiet crowd, maybe find an inner stillness within the crowd.) Again, what are the characteristics, sound and speech bubble for this third place?

An interpersonal polarity

Now try this experiment. Again sit grounded, eyes closed, relaxed, de-stress and breathe. Now bring to mind an argument, dispute or dissatisfaction you have with another person that matters to you. Place yourself and the other person in each palm. Observe your own self resting in your palm; are you hard or soft in this situation? Do you have mass and weight? What sound are you making rather than what you're saying, a shout, a whine, a scream or a whisper? Are you flaming red or lilywhite? And so on. Now try to sense, rather than just see, the other person in your other hand. What are their characteristics?

Now slowly bring your hands together, what would each of you have to do, how would each of you have to change, to accommodate the other in some new relationship that was more than compromise, more than Lose-Lose, even different from Win-Win?

An intra-personal polarity

Try this third experiment. For this find a space where you can stand in two places at least four foot apart and can move between them with your eyes closed. Stand upright and grounded, relax, de-stress and breathe. Now

bring to mind two circumstances where you have polarised feelings, such as confident, in control and having high self-esteem in one situation and the opposite in another. Or use an internal conflict between, say, desire and guilt, or a need to speak out and a fear to do so. Stand in one position and adopt an exaggerated posture that symbolises that position, then, eyes closed, move to the other position and adopt that posture. (You may be a pugilist in one and a wimp in the other, say.) Spend time in each position, explore the posture, further symbolise it by gestures and facial expression. Does each have a colour, sound, statement, etc., etc. If possible, make the sound and speak the statement.

Move slowly from one position to the other, observing how one posture moves into the other. Find a place, not necessarily in the centre, which feels most right. Or find an apex to form a triangle, rather than be on the line between the polarities. What are the characteristics of this third position, it may be an entirely different posture that is not a halfway house.

Exploring Ends and Middles

Rather than work with opposite or opposing polarities to find a creative middle, it may be that there is only one polarity being experienced, such as friendless and lonely, or the opposite of being so gregarious as to be afraid of being solitary. Or persistently angry, or persistently depressed. In the hands on knees experiment one hand would be full, the other empty. Here movement, if only a single step, towards the other unknown state can be explored. 'How would you be if you were a little less alone / fearful / calm / joyful? How would you sit or stand,

what would be your tone of voice?' A polarity may be strong in one environment, but weak in another, such as appropriately assertive at work, but unassertive in an intimate relationship. Here the one tone uses to say 'I can't do that report today' can be tried out on 'I'd like us to do X this weekend.'

Alternatively, being only in the middle may be the issue, always content but rarely joyful or sad. Here the work is to move outwards in both directions, starting with clasped hands. 'Life is grey, no blacks or whites or reds or greens.' If so, one might ask: 'Did you ever have a paint box? What happened to it? Where can you get some colours?' Alternatively one might feel trapped: 'I'm a traffic light that's stuck on amber.' So: 'If you can't be red as yet, how can you start to be orange? If you can't get to green, how can you move to ochre?'

Out of context and in cold print, these experiments, approaches and interventions may seem directive. In the live interaction between therapist and client they should always be, of course, sensitive to the situation and generally arise out of the interaction.

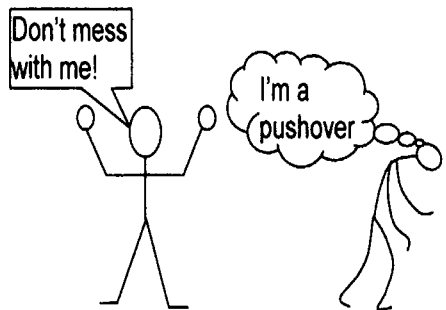
Other materials and methods

In the above experiments the body and metaphors such as sound and colour are used to make visible the inner sense, so that it may be seen, felt and worked on. One can obviously also use drawings, paints, clay, and other materials to model polarities and find the middle ground. For instance, two Plasticine or painted polarities can be cut up and joined to produce 'a something else'. With paintings it can

be instructive to paint the polarities on opposite sides of the same paper, so that cutting, discarding and folding are necessary. A heightened creative effort generates new insights. Or, with a uni-polar issue, to turn to the blank side of the painting and ask, 'What could be on this flip side?' Painting on one side, while not being able to see the other, but knowing it is there, may act as a creative stimulus. You may like to use some of these methods on some of the issues you may have experimented with earlier.

In therapeutic work a client's willingness, or not, to engage in experiments must, of course, be respected. For one person, standing postures may be too much too soon, while another client may be kneeling on the floor and then standing on the table. Drawing stick figures, especially with speech bubbles, is a safe alternative to a standing posture.

More abstract images may come to mind, such as for one client, a delicate flower was 'I'm a pushover', while 'Don't mess with me' an electricity pylon. I'm often surprised how simple objects lend themselves to be used. One client



likened themselves to the tissue box, hard on the outside but soft inside. But to have a large oval hole exposing their soft inner persona was too much. By pure chance, on the underside of the box was an alternative opening as a long thin slot. For my client, that was a safe enough way she could open up as a tissue box, as a person in the room, and as herself out there in the world.

Another client said 'My partner and I can't mesh because we're not a plug and socket, but two plugs!' We got out some plugs and 'discovered' that a two-way connector could join them. We went on to uncover what was the connector that kept them together. In some instances the client's own activities or history provides the symbolic material.

One client was the submissive partner in a relationship. I asked the client to model the two of them as shapes in clay, but nothing came, it wasn't their medium. However, the client was a musician, and asking 'If you were a duet, what instruments would you be playing?' led immediately to the image of violin and piano, the violin leads while the piano, the submissive partner, follows. This we could work with.

Impasse and Conflict

Polarity work obviously has an application in couple therapy, but also in individual work, and in life in general, dilemmas, impasses and conflicts arise. Such problems can be:

- **Solved** - Usually the most difficult and elusive answer, it can mean settling for one unsatisfactory polarity or the other..

- **Resolved** - A mid point on the continuum, a compromise that doesn't fully satisfy.

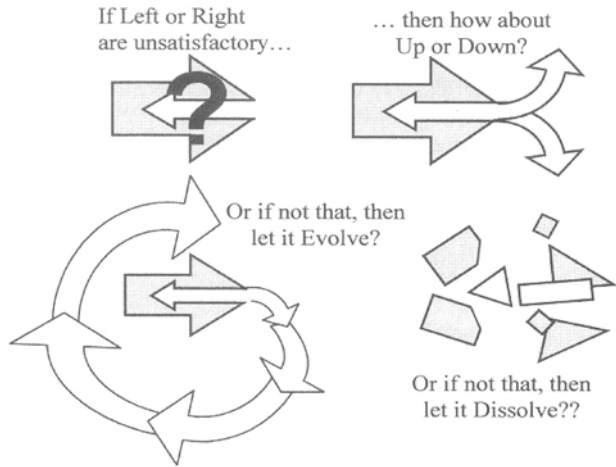
- **Dissolved** - Often the most creative outcome, we can change, or even disassemble or erase, the question or problem itself, rather than find an answer. One's seeking a place which is outside the continuum of 'This or That'.

An example was a client that 'had a demon'. Neither ejecting the demon (fight) nor ignoring it (flight) seemed



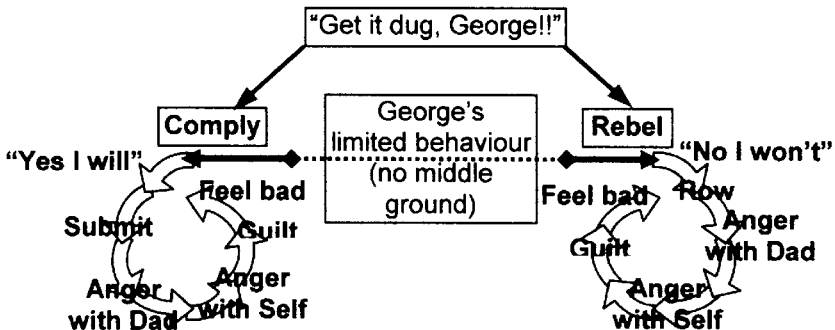
possible. Making friends with it was closer to being free of him. A similar situation is having an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other giving opposing advice, that is, having conflicting introjects, neither of which is the client's true voice. If they can't be silenced, can the client role-play each of them talking to the other? Or imagine they're secretly conversing behind the client's back, so what are they saying to each other? This is obviously a variant on the Gestalt notion of top dog and under dog. They too can be encouraged to dialogue and find that they have talents that can each serve the other. The following

diagrams illustrate some inventive outcomes for a dilemma or impasse.

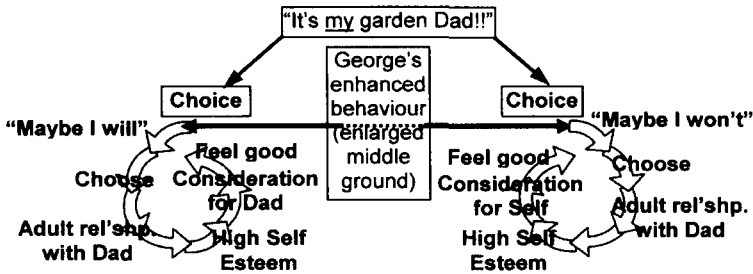


George - Achieving Choice

This vignette illustrates how bi-polar behaviour, lacking a middle range, can be made more continuous, particularly by finding a third point, rather than a mere compromise. George was in his thirties, married with a family, but still dominated and bullied by his father who treated him as a sixteen year old. Father and George resolved differences (or rather didn't resolve them) by endless rows. Dad was a very keen gardener, George less so. Dad would frequently visit, uninvited, and tell George what to do in the garden 'Get it dug, George!!' George was usually too busy with work or family, so would either row and rebel, leading to anger and guilt, or submit, still creating anger and guilt. George couldn't find a middle position between these polarities. *(Names, details and circumstances have been changed to preserve confidentiality.)*



In therapy, with me role playing Dad saying 'Get it dug!' and George swinging between submission and rebellion, George suddenly exclaimed 'It's *my* garden Dad!!' This stopped me, as Dad, in my tracks, a blocking response, not an unsatisfactory compromise, but a stance that was outside George's normally polarised positions.



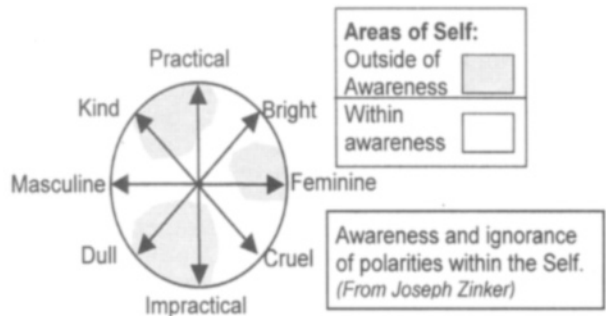
Upon then using such responses in real life, George's relationship with Dad improved radically, he was able to occupy the middle ground, doing some gardening, or not, as he chose. Dad could no longer control him. In Transactional Analysis terms they had moved from flipping between Controlling Parent-Adaptive Child and Controlling Parent-Rebellious Child to an Adult-Adult relationship. Obviously, things didn't change overnight and George had more work to do on his behaviour, but this was a major step towards integration.

Ways of being that are out of awareness

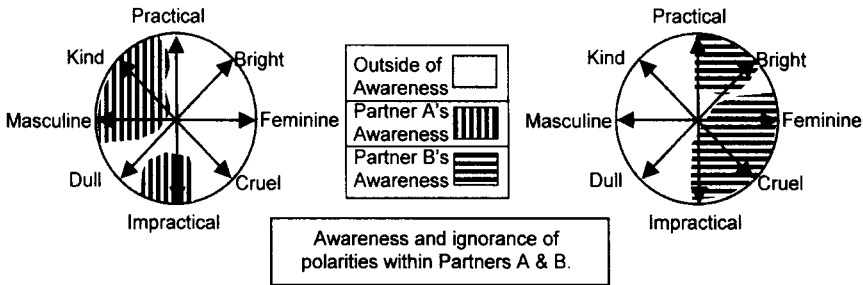
For most of us, awareness and behaviours lie on a fairly broad spectrum, a wide middle ground with, perhaps, a bias towards one polarity, limited awareness of the other pole and also of some other areas:-



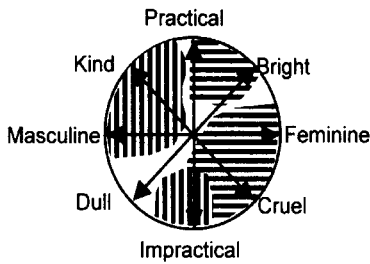
Joseph Zinker writes extensively on polarities and sees the many continuums within us as forming the self concept, with ways of being within, or outside of, our awareness:-



As we are all lacking and incomplete in some respects, we tend to seek out a complementary partner who will 'fill in the blanks' for us. Together, as a couple, we hope to be a more complete human being:



The choice for the couple is to either become confluent, entirely enmeshed, referring to themselves as 'we', or to have some degree of autonomy, saying instead 'my partner and I'. Such considerations and images are obviously relevant in couple counselling.



Joint extended awareness and reduced ignorance of polarities within A & B as a couple. Either **Co-dependent?** Or **Mutually supportive?**

Co-Dependency or Mutual Support?

I would like to link Zinker's ideas with another polarity envisaged by Abraham Maslow, that of deficiency-love and growth-love. Deficiency-love is where, as in Zinker's couple, each fills in the others blanks, does it for them, 'He's the emotional one. I'm the practical one'. And they continue to do it for each other, remain confluent, enmeshed and co-dependent. Neither can operate satisfactorily alone, needing the other, both lack growth,

staying static. On the other hand (to return to our very first metaphor), in growth love, each partner starts incomplete, but as each is an expert in their own polarities, each can teach the other how to enhance their under-developed polarity. Through mutual support, each becomes a fuller person.



Living more fully

Irvin Yalom says, somewhere, that the purpose of psychotherapy is to enable us to develop healthy interpersonal relationships. The converse is also true, healthy personal relationships serve as therapy. And 'healthy' doesn't mean perfect or ideal, but normal. (One reply to 'How do I know my course of therapy has reached its end?' is 'When we're just talking of the ups and downs of everyday life.')

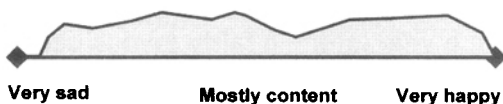
In my own history, it was the joy and sorrow of an intense relationship that stretched my awareness continuum. For the vast majority of my life my emotional range lacked highs and lows, I was mostly just content.



Then, as they say, I met someone. Very soon my continuum became:-



And joy and delight are always accompanied by their flip side, their polarity, and so my life became and freely moved along: -



And that's where I am now, as I write this final sentence.

Further reading

Joseph Zinker, *Creative Process In Gestalt Therapy*, Vintage Books 1977

Petruska Clarkson & Jennifer Mackewn, *Fritz Perls (in the series Key Figures In Counselling and Psychotherapy)*, Sage Publications 1993

Gaie Houston, *The Red Book of Gestalt*, Airlift Book Co. 1990 (New edition available.)

Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Van-Nostram Reinhold. 1982

Tony Morris is counsellor accredited by AHPP and BAC. He combines his Gestalt orientation with solution focused techniques and also draws upon several different models from the humanistic paradigm.

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