The Use of Clean Space
to Facilitate a "Stuck" Client – a Case Study

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Abstract

Introduction: This paper consists of a case study of a spatially-based therapeutic approach, Clean Space, which facilitates a client through a "stuck" state. The study situates "clean" approaches within the context of mental space and metaphor research, outlines the method, and provides a full transcript of a session, explanatory commentary and client feedback.

Objectives: This case study aims at showing how the Clean Space approach can successfully facilitate a client's endeavor to create the conditions for the emergence of a novel resolution to their problematic state without any content-related interpretation and only with process interventions coming from the therapist.

Methods: The Clean Space approach.

Results: The session described in this study demonstrates how the client uses physical space and multiple perspectives to work through a long-standing problematic perception which they defined as "stuck". The evidence for change is reported by the client at the end of the session and by the feedback she provided one and four months later.

Conclusions: Clean Space enables the client to use the interplay of physical and mental space, to externalize her thoughts, feelings, metaphors and symbolic perceptions thereby engaging her creativity in an emergent change process. It also shows how the therapist keeps his presence to a minimum, and his language "clean", i.e. free of his own assumptions, interpretations and metaphors.

Keywords: Clean Space, clean language, metaphor, mental space, psychotherapy

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I. Introduction

Background to the "Clean" approach

Clean Space is one of a growing number of "spatial psychotherapies" (Derks & Manea, 2016). Its creator, David Grove, was a counseling psychologist whose innovative ideas and therapeutic methods evolved through three phases. The 1980s saw Grove create Clean Language as an approach to working with trauma that utilized autogenic metaphor (Grove & Panzer, 1989; Owen, 1989; Pincus & Sheikh, 2009). In the 1990s he extended his work into perceptual space outside the body, intergenerational healing and nonverbal information (Grove, 1998; Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). In 2002 his focus shifted to movement, iteration, networks of spaces and emergent knowledge (Harland, 2009; Pincus & Sheikh, 2011). This was a development that was to preoccupy him until his death in 2008.

Grove recognized that locations could hold knowledge. These locations could be on or inside the body, or in perceptual-metaphorical space. Numerous therapies – such as Neuro-Linguistic Psychotherapy (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000), Family Constellations (Hellinger, Weber & Beaumont, 1998) and Pesso-Boyden System Psychomotor Therapy (Pesso, 2013) – have utilized physical space in a more or less defined way. In Grove's process however, the location, content and name of the spaces are all determined by the client. Moreover, the spaces are not decided in advance; they become apparent one at a time as the process unfolds. Although the procedures are well specified, at all stages, neither the facilitator nor the client knows what is going to happen next. To assist the client, Grove devised a new set of clean questions and directions and a process he called, *Clean Space*.

Tompkins and Lawley (2003) were the first to document Grove's initial experiments in Clean Space and followed this with a review of its development six years later (2009). More recently, Lawley and Way (2017) produced a comprehensive guide with case studies and examples of variations to the basic Clean Space process which includes working with couples and groups.

Defining the "clean" approach

Evidence from a number of disciplines has demonstrated that the way people answer can be substantially affected by: question construction (Harris, 1973; Loftus & Palmer, 1974); framing (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981); changing a single word (Heritage, et al., 2007; Loftus & Zanni, 1975); presupposition (Loftus, 1975); introduced metaphors (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; 2013); and nonverbal behavior such as paralanguage (Duncan, Rosenberg & Finkelstein, 1969) and gesture (Gurney, Pine & Wiseman, 2013). Furthermore, in these studies subjects seldom indicate an awareness of being subtly and systematically influenced (Loftus & Hoffman, 1989).

Grove maintained that this kind of subtle imposition can contaminate the client's original experience, making it harder for them to know their own mind. Grove's solution was to minimize the use of metaphors and assumptions in his questions and only include words spoken by the client. He wanted the "I-ness of the therapist to appear to cease to exist" and he honed his questions over many years until they gave the client maximal freedom to answer using entirely their own lexicon.

When therapists and counselors first encounter Clean Language they often remark that they do not impose their assumptions and interpretations on their clients. However, even therapists who aim to 'not lead' their clients will do so *unintentionally* because of the nature of everyday language. Using Clean Language means more than asking a few open questions; it is a way to enact a philosophy (Grove, 1998).

Mental space

We live in, interact with and are influenced by two kinds of space: the familiar space of the physical world, and our inner, private, imaginary world – what cognitive scientists call our *mental space* (Evans & Green, 2006; Manea & Barbu, 2017).

These spaces are co-dependent and mutually affect each other at both conscious and unconscious levels. We are constantly reacting to our environment. Location, distance, height and angle are important because we cannot help but give them meaning. For example, the size and shape of a room, the height of the ceiling and the seating arrangement can all influence our physical state and our mental processes (Martin, Goldstein, & Cialdini, 2014). And it works the other way round. We try to organize the exterior world (mostly unconsciously) so that it corresponds to the configuration of our interior world. (Jung, 1964)

Our imaginary world enables us to have abstract thoughts and to give meaning to intangible things like processes and relationships. The primary way we do this is with metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; 1999) and the most common source of metaphors in all languages yet studied is space. It is so fundamental to meaning that Steven Pinker (1997, p. 357) contends the metaphor of space acts like the "medium of thought itself".

Clean Space

Clean Space is a three-dimensional process in which the client uses different locations within a room or outdoors to signify and contain various aspects of their experience. By identifying six or so spaces, the client literally views a topic from a number of different angles. Once these spaces are established the client moves around their own network of ideas, involving their *body* as well as their *mind*. In doing so, problems are solved, new ideas are generated, and creativity is sparked.

It is not only the body that gets involved, the client can also utilize the *environment* to learn more about themselves, accessing information not easily available otherwise. For example, physically standing in a corner may evoke the sense of having been metaphorically 'backed into a corner', or the sun may start to shine and 'cast a light' on some of the client's spaces, leaving the others in shadow. In almost all Clean Space sessions, the original, seemingly random identification of locations forms a network of meaning for the client and it becomes what Grove called *psychoactive*. The client is no longer simply wandering around a room while talking about their ideas; they relate to the space as though it is imbued with symbolic information tailor-made for them.

Clean Space is based on the premise that spatial relationships can have psychological and symbolic meaning. When a person creates a network of meaningful spaces a new context emerges. The client unconsciously projects the characteristics of the network out into physical space, which in turn, influences the client's perceptions, creating a feedback loop. Once the projection and feedback are in lockstep a change in one is reflected by a change in the other. This enables the client to not only examine their own thoughts and feelings in new ways; it also generates new embodied experiences, right there and then.

II. Method

Clean Space facilitates a person to build a network of experiences one space at a time. The client establishes this network by going through four essential routines: Start, Establish Spaces, Establish Links and Finish (see Figure 1).

Throughout these routines the client continually responds, consciously or unconsciously, to what is happening within their network. When features of the network emerge spontaneously they are called *network effects* (Lawley & Way, 2017). Attending to these effects is how Clean Space becomes a personalized process.

Network effects are *emergent properties* – characteristics and functions that appear spontaneously at a certain level of complexity. They cannot be predicted by examining the components or even the relationships between them. They emerge from the pattern of those relationships.

By acknowledging and working with the surprising and unexpected events that occur, the method changes from a general format into one tailored to the individual. Noticing network effects and, under certain conditions, directing the client to attend to them is part of the artistry of facilitating Clean Space.

Clean Space starts with the facilitator having paper, post-it notes and colored pens available. The client is invited to write or draw something that represents their desired outcome or the subject matter they would like to attend to. This defines the 'topic' and sets the initial context for the session. The client physically places the topic "where it needs to be" and then places him or herself "where you are in relation to that [the topic]". A few clean questions establish what is known at this space and its relationship to the topic.
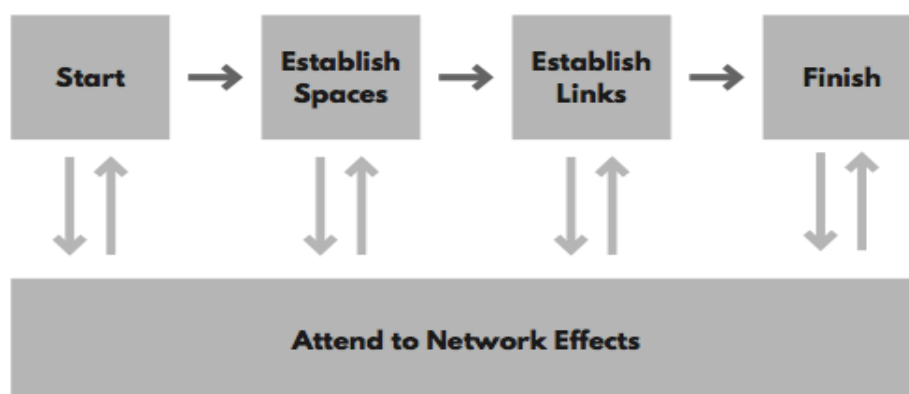

Figure 1: the Clean Space process

Through a simple iterative routine, the client "finds" a number of places and discovers what he or she knows in each. A change in space necessarily involves a physical perspective shift, and with it, a shift in mental space. This new perspective might generate a thought, a feeling, a memory or something else entirely.

As additional spaces are added, a psychogeography emerges (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000) and the possible perspectives and potential possibilities multiply. As the client considers the relationships between the spaces, not just conceptually, but also spatially and symbolically, new meanings and perspectives emerge spontaneously, creating a cascade of insights and change. Another major perspective shift occurs when the client relates to the network as a whole. A client may suddenly realize that the configuration of spaces looks like a path, an arrow or a spider's web. Seeing something through a new metaphor may well unlock a creative solution to a long-standing problem or prompt an insight into an important outcome.

Facilitator's attention

Unlike most talk therapies, the facilitator gives minimal attention to the client's spoken content or narrative – that is *their* responsibility – the facilitator focuses on managing the process and attending to:

- how the client uses the space;
- the spatial metaphors they use;
- the configuration of spaces;
- movement of the client's body;
- potentially serendipitous moments;
- the way the client reacts to what they discover.

Facilitating Clean Space requires a radical shift in the traditional client-therapist relationship. It requires setting aside preconceptions of how change 'should' happen. Rather than trying to understand what it means for the client, it is more important to calibrate the client's engagement in their process and the effects they report.

III. Case Study

The transcript of a complete Clean Space session lasting about 40 minutes is provided below. The client is a professional woman in her 40's. The client has given permission to use this material anonymously, so we will call her Alyson.

A non-linear, spatial process is difficult to describe on paper and Clean Space does not produce sequential narratives. An observer may therefore struggle to understand what is going on for the client. As you read the transcript it is important to remember that most of the client's process takes place internally, between them and their network of spaces. To make it more readable, false starts and repeated words etc. have been removed. Half-way through a map is included to represent the spatial configuration of the client's network.

Start (Beginning the Clean Space session)

The session starts in a large room furnished with a sofa, chairs and a table. The facilitator begins by offering the client, Alyson, some blank paper and a few colored pens. He invites her to:

Facilitator: "Write or draw your desired outcome or topic of interest."

Alyson writes on the paper: "I want to walk out of here feeling freer" (this is 'the topic').

When the facilitator invites Alyson to "place that [the paper] where it needs to be", she first places it on the sofa, then on the floor and finally wedges it in the frame of a window. The facilitator waits, and when Alyson seems satisfied with the placement he continues:

Facilitator: "And place yourself where you are now in relation to that", gesturing to the topic as he says 'that'.

The client walks around the room before sitting in a chair near a corner two meters from her topic. She is facing into the room.

Facilitator: "And what do you know here?"

Alyson: "I'm scared of peoples' expectations. I get this tightness in my stomach. I'm scared of saying my own experience, my own opinion. I overly conform to what I feel other people are wanting."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about that *[gestures to topic]*?"

Alyson turns to her left towards the topic.

Alyson: "I've gone empty headed. I feel stationary. Stuck in this corner. I don't know how to feel freer. I'm worried. I don't see beyond the duty. I'm in it."

Facilitator: "And what could this space be called?"

Alyson: "Stuck."

The facilitator hands Alyson some post-it notes and a pen.

Facilitator: "And write the name of this space and use the post-it to mark this space."

The client places the post-it on the seat of the chair and thus has established Space 1.

Establishing the network

Facilitator: "And find another space."

Alyson stands up, looks around and moves a couple of steps to her right, facing Space 1.

Facilitator: "And what do you know here?"

Alyson: "I feel like a parent. I expect a lot from her *[points to the chair at Space 1]*. I expect her to be a perfect being, completely independent. I want her to take responsibility and not bother me."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about that *[gestures to topic]*?"

Alyson: "No."

Alyson names Space 2 "Mother", writes it on a post-it and marks the space.

When she is invited to find another space, Alyson crosses to the other side of the room facing the topic.

Facilitator: "And what do you know here?"

Alyson: "There is fear here… And there is a barrier, a membrane I can't get through *[gestures in front]*. I am on one side of the barrier and there is a cloud on the other. The barrier is invisible to everybody else, but [*looks at Space 1*] she is aware of it."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about that *[gestures to topic]*?"

Alyson: "There is a different atmosphere here to over there *[gestures to topic]*. Here it's heavy, there's no flow through the membrane. It's denser with very different conditions on the other side. I feel an incredible guilt here. A stagnant weight."

Alyson names Space 3 "Guilt", marking it with a post-it.

Facilitator: "And find another space."

Alyson next moves into the middle of the room facing Space 1 and the topic.

Facilitator: "And what do you know here?"

Alyson: "I feel sorry for her *[gestures to Space 1]*. It's oppressive with mother behind her. I can see them both from here. I can see the structure more and the guilt loading on to her *[gestures to Space 1]*. She lets it accumulate instead of saying 'no'. She piles it around her. It's her duty to gather it all and take responsibility to hold it."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about that *[gestures to topic]*?"

Alyson: "I can see other parts as well. I feel good in this place. I can see a structure to what's going on. My stomach feels more relaxed. There is a strength about this thinking/observing place. *[Long pause.]* You know, I wonder if the membrane is what is holding it all in place. That is an incredible thought!"
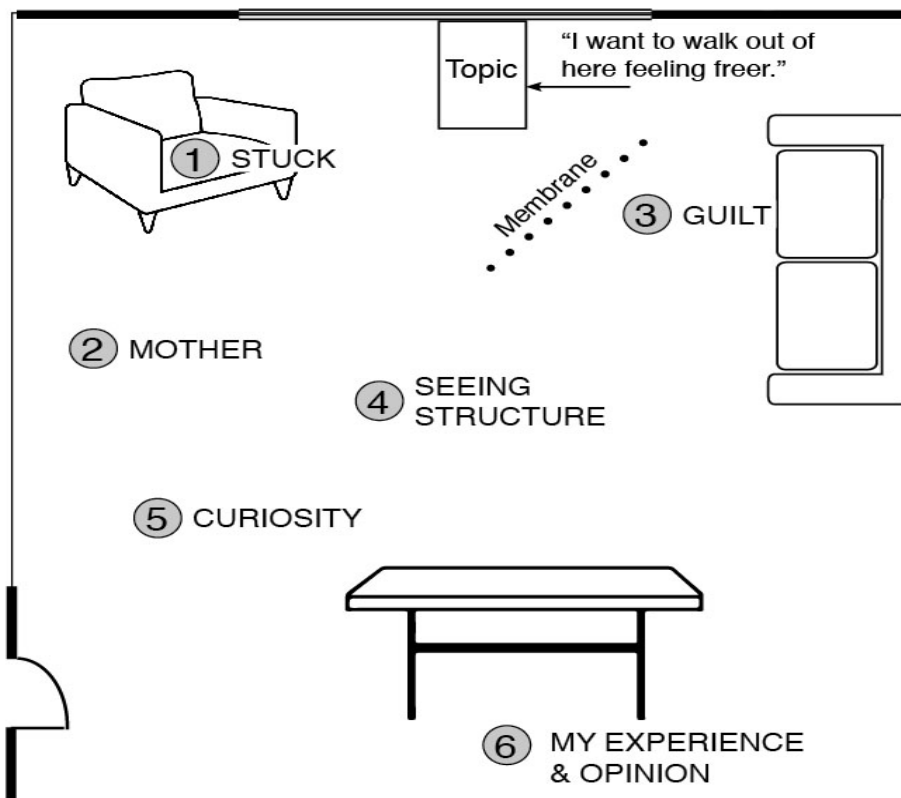

Figure 2: configuration of client network half-way through session

Facilitator: "And what could this space be called?"

Alyson: "Seeing Structure" *[Space 4]*

Facilitator: "And find another space."

Alyson moves further into the room.

Facilitator: "And what do you know here?"

Alyson: "Now I'm curious how this [*gestures to the other spaces*] could change."

The client is now deep in thought, so James waits for several minutes until Alyson comes out of her reverie.

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about *[gestures to topic]*?"

Alyson: "This space is Curiosity." Alyson reaches for the post-its and pen.

After marking Space 5, and before the facilitator can say anything, Alyson moves behind a table at the end of the room and says the following:

Alyson: "I have a desire to express myself freely. Me saying what I think about things and my ideas about them. Saying and showing what I see."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about *[gestures to topic]*?"

Alyson: "I'm standing solidly on the ground here. It's an overview. I'm free to think, to say my own experience and opinion."

Facilitator: "And what could this space be called?"

Alyson: "My Experience and Opinion", Alyson states firmly.

Establishing links

The facilitator continues by inviting Alyson to use this perspective to consider the other spaces:

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Curiosity there *[gestures to Space 5]*?"

Alyson: "Curiosity is the driver. It's flexible."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Mother *[gestures to Space 2]*?"

Alyson: "Mother just doesn't care."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Guilt *[gestures to Space 3]*?"

Alyson: "There is a passive colluding. Guilt sees but does nothing and it all piles up over her *[gestures with both hands, enacting a piling up around 'her' sitting in Space 1]*. Because of the membrane there's no flow, it's stagnant."

The facilitator notes this is the second reference to the spatial metaphors "membrane" and "no flow", and so invites the client to continue to attend to those metaphors:

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about 'membrane' and 'no flow' there *[points to in front of Space 3]*?"

Alyson: "There's a force-field around the membrane… It's… it's protecting the mother."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Seeing Structure *[gestures to Space 4]*?"

Alyson: "From there I could see her *[points to Space 1]* taking on more, more, more. From here, I can see a self-pity over there, but self-pity isn't allowed. She has to pretend to be very strong, take it in and not to question it."

Facilitator: "And return to one of the other spaces."

Alyson goes to Space 3, "Guilt".

Facilitator: "And now, what do you know here?"

Alyson: "A sadness. I feel so sad just standing here. There is a feeling at the bottom of my feet where I don't feel connected to the ground."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Mother *[gestures to Space 2]*?"

Alyson: "Always wanting to make mother happy. Wanting things to be perfect, or they're no good to her."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Curiosity *[gestures to Space 5]*?"

Alyson: "I would like to notice what's happening and feel relaxed… *[long pause and suddenly says]* I *have* to move."

The facilitator would have continued with the routine of "Establishing Links" with Spaces 1, 4 and 6, but instead he responds to the client's emphatic statement.

Facilitator: "And return to one of the other spaces."

Alyson moves to Space 4, "Seeing Structure".

Facilitator: "And now, what do you know here?"

Alyson: "*[Long pause]* It's like being in space. I can see stuff in different places."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about My Experience & Opinion *[gestures to Space 6]*?"

Alyson turns around to look at Space 6 and says:

Alyson: "There I don't need to hold on to all this stuff!"

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Guilt *[gestures to Space 3]*?"

Alyson: "Guilt is colluding with it, allowing it to happen, not intervening."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Stuck *[gestures to Space 1]*?"

Alyson: "The membrane is all around her. She took all of this on because somebody had to and she thought it was her responsibility because mother didn't take responsibility… If mother gets upset she feels incredible guilt… There's a contamination *[gestures back and forth between Spaces 1 and 2]*."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about Curiosity *[gestures to Space 5]*?"

Alyson: "Before, if there was any movement of the membrane towards mother, it didn't work because of the contamination."

Since the client has already referred to Space 2 from here, the facilitator does not need to invite the client to establish further links. Instead, he continues with:

Facilitator: "And return to one of the other spaces."

The client moves to Space 5, Curiosity.

Facilitator: "And now, what do you know here?"

Alyson: "I'm curious about how… I'd like to release my guilt. Do you know what I'd like to do? *[pause]* I'd like to release something from the stagnant weights."

Before the facilitator can ask anything else the client goes to Guilt, picks up the post-it and places it on the chair in Space 1. She returns to Curiosity.

Facilitator: "And now, what do you know here?"

Alyson: "There's something like a handle on the membrane. Pulling on that means everything comes with it… *[pause]* Now the membrane can move to Mother *[gestures, indicating the membrane is moving]*."

Alyson walks over to Seeing Structure and moves the post-it to the chair in Space 1. Then, she returns to Curiosity and after a pause, picks up the post-it for Curiosity, walks to Space 1 and places it on the chair. Finally, she sits in the chair on the post-its.

Facilitator: "And now, what do you know here *[Space 1]*?"

Alyson: "This brings a visual, like a sorting out of stuff. I don't need to carry all of this stuff anymore… there's movement in Stuck now."

The essential Clean Space routines call for the facilitator to continue inviting Alyson to return to one of the other spaces until they have all been revisited. Since there is only one remaining space Alyson has yet to Establish Links from, the facilitator invites her to go there.

Facilitator: "And return to Mother."

Alyson goes to Space 2.

Facilitator: "And now, what do you know here?"

Alyson: "It's a free position, not involved in everything."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about My Experience and Opinion *[gestures to Space 6]*?"

Alyson: "This mother does not want to see what's happening – but that doesn't matter anymore."

Facilitator: "And is there anything else you know here about *[gestures to Space 1]*?"

The facilitator is careful not to use the name "Stuck" as that may not be appropriate anymore.

Alyson: "The child is not my responsibility. *[Pause]* It's strange, I'm aware how I look here – my hair, how I am standing. It seems different somehow."

Finish (ending the Clean Space session)

All the spaces have been revisited, links established, and the client has spontaneously reorganized the network. There is nothing left to do but complete the process by finishing back in Space 1.

Facilitator: "And return to *[gestures to Space 1]*."

Alyson moves to Space 1. She does not sit, but remains standing beside the chair looking at her topic, *I want to walk out of here feeling freer*.

Facilitator: "And knowing all this *[gesture around the room]*, what do you know now?"

Alyson: "I'm scared of other people's anger, of causing other people to be in pain. I think they will explode if they have those feelings… I let things pile up and then feel guilty… Always guilt and it's heavy because I have taken it on myself. Now I know it's not my responsibility. It's about handing over responsibility."

Facilitator: "And knowing that, what difference does it make?"

Alyson: "I wonder what I could release… *[pause]* I'm releasing it in to the Universe."

Facilitator: "And what difference does *that* make?"

Alyson: "I'm relaxed here now. There's a flow and I feel freer."

Alyson *is* now noticing what's happening to her and she feels relaxed and freer – exactly what she said she wanted from the process.

Facilitator: "And when you are ready, collect up your paper and post-it notes."

IV. Discussion

The case study illustrates how a Clean Space facilitator keeps the process moving, especially when initially establishing the spaces. David Grove used to say each space only needs a "short dwell time" of two or three questions. In this example the client starts by placing her "stuck" self in Space 1 and her "mother" in Space 2, but this is far from common. In fact, the experiences and names clients give to their spaces are often idiosyncratic. A commonality across clients is that one or more of the spaces afford various forms of "metacognition" (Flavell, 1979), as clearly occurs several times in this session.

As more and more of the network is created the client's engagement in their own process increases. Even though the transcript cannot show the thoughtful silences and the full involvement of the client's body, psychoactivity is evident in the client's spontaneous responses, and network effects are indicated by the appearance of metaphorical features, such as: "Stuck; Membrane-barrier; Cloud; (no) Flow; Overview; Pile around/up/on; Hold; Release".

Relationships (links) between the spaces (nodes) add to the richness of the network and to its complexity. Clients often report that there is a moment when they have to 'let go' of trying to monitor everything and instead simply respond to whatever is happening to their network. After returning to Space 3, the client says: "I *have to* move", suggesting she is experiencing a strong physical reaction. From then on it appears that a cascade of insights and responses inspires the client's process (while the facilitator attempts to keep up with what's happening).

Spontaneously the membrane acquires "a handle", enabling it to be moved. This can happen from "Curiosity" (Space 5) when it could not happen before from "Stuck" (Space 1) or "Guilt" (Space 3). Naturally occurring client-generated metaphors in psychotherapy can represent deeply personal and symbolic aspects of experience – especially those that are difficult to describe in other ways – and yet, metaphor theory has been subjected to little psychotherapeutic research (Needham-Didsbury, 2012).

The change in location of "membrane" from between Space 3 and Space 1/Topic, to between Space 2 and Space 1 enables the client to reorganize her network. When she moves the post-its for "Seeing Structure" (Space 4) and "Curiosity" (Space 5) to Space 1, Space 1 needs to accommodate these additions, and "stuck" morphs into "flow". Furthermore, the client's experience at Space 2 ("Mother") changes radically.

In retrospect, it is possible to make sense of the client's process, but at the time, neither the therapist nor the client had any idea what was going to happen or what was needed for "flow" to be introduced into "stuck". The therapist did not need to know. His job was to trust the process, stay clean, and respond to the client's responses to their network of spaces. It is the wisdom in the client's mind-body-spatial system that is engaged by Clean Space from which a unique solution emerges that fits perfectly for each client.

Client feedback

One month after the session the client spontaneously emailed the following text:

"I just wanted to let you know how impactful the last session was with you! This placing in space is magical in its effects. I knew there was a connection to my burden, but not to this extent. It is so good to have externalized my feelings into this sculptural form and the other parts in relation to it. A thousand thanks."

Three months later the client was asked by the facilitator if there was anything she would like to report, she emailed:

"It has been interesting how impactful the session was. It was very real to me, perhaps because I had to move, and I was also able to visualize in a dissociated way. It is a method that suits me well. There is some drama and there are characters, point of view, feelings, voices...

I realized how I have been gathering other people's stuff and holding it… I have visualized the process as a loosening of the bond between me and the stuff... a process of handing over. I have also had to see other people as capable. This is a lot of work, especially as I have a lot of stuff, both at home and at work!!

But it has started to shift, and the main thing is that my attitude has shifted, the thinking in my mind when talking to my colleagues: what is my responsibility here and what is yours?"

The client's feedback one and four months after the session confirms the changes have continued to have positive effects, and although there is a "a lot of work" still to be done, her "attitude has shifted" and she is relating differently to her colleagues.

V. Conclusion

Clean Space makes the 'medium of thought itself' visible, malleable and in service to the creative process. As well as a deeper understanding of how to handle a particular issue in their life, clients leave knowing they have more resources and creativity than they might have suspected, and they learn to trust there is a wisdom to how their system works – something that can come in handy innumerable times in the future.

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