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## **When Where Matters: How psychoactive space is created and utilised**

**James Lawley**

This article describes how psychoactive space is created and how it can be utilised in Symbolic Modelling. Once a space becomes psychoactive for a person they are effectively 'living in their metaphor'. Then, when something changes in that perceptual space (often spontaneously), more of their mind-body is involved. This usually produces a more embodied and systemic change than just 'talking about' changing. The experience is not necessarily accompanied by a large display of emotion or catharsis -- affect does not equal effect -- but the client knows something has changed, even if they are unable to articulate it at the time.

My aim is to present a joined-up model of how methodologies derived from the work of David Grove invoke the psychoactivity of spatial relations in therapeutic, as well as in other settings.

Before we investigate psychoactive space, however, we need to take a step back and define perceptual space and psychoactivity.

### **Perceptual Space**

Perceptual space is a person's subjective experience of 'a space'. Perceptually, a space is defined by the configuration of objects and symbols that exist within it and usually by a boundary that separates this space from any other space. It includes two interrelated aspects:

- *Physical space* around and inside a person's body that can be perceived directly with their senses.
- *Metaphorical space* which extends to as far as their imagination permits.

David Grove's journey into perceptual space came out of his wondering: When people dissociate, where do they dissociate to? This involved an enquiry into the nature of space and the role it plays in the therapeutic process -- an exploration he started in the early 1990s and which continues to this day.

I consider what we regard as 'physical space' to be a construct of the human mind resulting from the co-evolution of our particular senses and neurology and our environment. Rather than being something that is 'out there' independent of us, space is a dynamic construct that has evolved as human societies have evolved. Our notion of space has changed dramatically since the invention of the microscope and the telescope for example. I consider imaginative space to be an embodied metaphor of the mind derived from our experience of physical space.<sup>1</sup>

## **Psychoactivity**

Psychoactivity is a particular kind of relationship between a person, their body, what they perceive and the context of that perception. Psychoactivity occurs when a person's thoughts, emotions and body sensations take on symbolic significance in response to what they are perceiving.

Certain drugs are considered psychoactive. That is, they have the effect of altering our perception and mood and hence our experience of our self and the world we inhabit. This occurs most dramatically with hallucinogens, but the same is true to a lesser extent with pain killers -- we only take them because they change our experience. With a psychoactive drug, the drug is seen to be the causal agent of the change in our experience. (It isn't; it's just a trigger for our system to respond in the way our system is organised to respond. This is why people have such individual reactions to the same drug.)

When I use the term psychoactive in this article I am referring to those occasions when our own perceptions seem to be the agent causing our experience to change. Cultural icons are a perfect example. When we see our national flag or hear our national anthem it appears that these cause us to spontaneously respond in the way we do. Conjuring up the image of the flag or playing the anthem in our mind can have a similar effect. It is like being intimately engaged with a movie or a novel. At some level we know that we are just watching images on a screen or reading words on a page and yet we cannot stop our self having emotional responses to what those images and words represent.

Jung called the extra something imbued in a symbolic object 'numinosity'. For us that puts the agency too much with the object. 'Psychoactivity' puts the agency where it belongs -- with the individual's psyche.

## **Psychoactive Space**

Space becomes psychoactive once a person's mind-body starts to react symbolically to their physical surroundings and/or to their imaginative mind-space. David Grove coined the term 'psychoactive space' because it seems as if our perceptions are causing us to react and that we have little choice in the matter -- which is true to some extent. When our perception of a space and the spatial relations contained therein have an independence from us, we are effectively living in the symbolism of the space moment by moment. Although I am referring to the space as psychoactive, I want to emphasise that psychoactivity is a relationship between the perceiver and the perceived (and/or the perceiver and the context).

When attention is focussed on a symbol the psychoactivity of space will likely remain in the background of awareness and may only manifest implicitly. An example is when a person unconsciously gestures to the location of a symbol in their perceptual space. At other times, when the space itself enters the foreground of awareness its psychoactive nature can be worked with explicitly.

Once the physical space around and within a client becomes psychoactive then whatever happens within that space often become imbued with coincidental or, to use another Jungian term, synchronistic meaning. This is why David Grove says if you pay it due regard, space will become your co-therapist.

## Spatial Relations

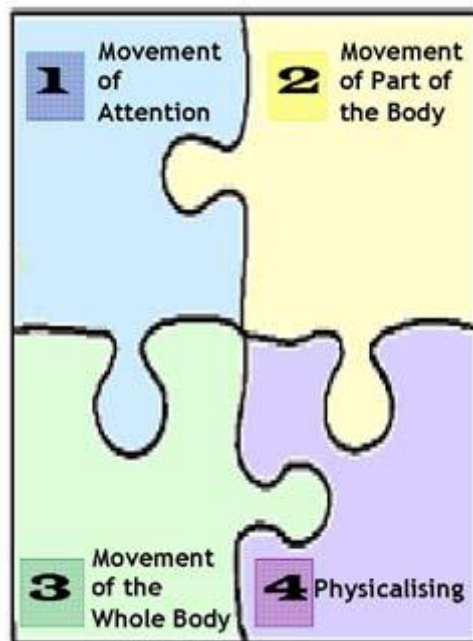
A space becomes psychoactive when the spatial relations of the physical objects and imaginative symbols in it invoke an extra significance over and above their everyday meaning; in short, when where something is matters. And where is always in relation to a perceiver. For example the further away we are from something that scares us, generally the more relaxed we feel about it. Here the spatial relation is simply distance from our body. Similarly, the slower a scary something approaches the less fearful we are likely to be. Here the spatial relation is change of distance over time.<sup>2</sup>

Another very common spatial relationship is whether something is inside, outside or at the boundary of a container: inside or outside our body, the room, the tennis court, our nation, our planet, etc. Then there are all the spatial relations created by objects relative to each other. If I put a perspex wall (physical or imagined) between me and an attacker it changes my state. Whether I have the world on my shoulders or at my feet makes all the difference. Almost all prepositions in the English language can be considered spatial metaphors.<sup>3</sup>

There are a multitude of examples like these because spatial relationships are fundamental to our existence from the moment we are conceived. So perhaps it is not surprising that spatial metaphors are the most common kind of metaphor in every language studied.<sup>4</sup>

## Invoking Psychoactive Space

Having defined how psychoactive space involves both imaginary and physical space, and that spatial relations can create the conditions for a psychoactive response, the rest of the article will be devoted to four fundamental ways to generate or invoke psychoactive space:



**#1.** Movement of attention. The apparent 'theatre of the mind' in which we consciously perceive our experience is created through our attending to different components of that experience located in different places. This is a private, interior space which has to be externalised through language (or through 2, 3 and 4 below) before it becomes known to anyone else. Language can be used to invoke a psychoactive space but only because our mind-body perceives that space as something real within which we seemingly move our attention.<sup>5</sup>

**#2.** Movement of part of the body. Most often the part of our body that moves is a hand, the head or the eyes, but almost any part can be involved in spatial marking -- i.e. indicating that our ideas, feelings, images, etc. have a location in relation to our body.<sup>6</sup>

**#3.** Movement of the whole body. We can imbue space with meaning when we move through it, or act out a scene, or dance. Sometimes just turning around or moving a few inches from one place to another may radically alter our perception.

**#4.** Physicalising is representing an interior perceptual landscape in an exterior material form. This includes drawing (mapping, sketching, charting, diagramming), sculpting, arranging the physical environment, using post-it notes, etc. The defining characteristic of physicalising is that the end result has a physical existence independent of its creator -- and that the where of things matter.

These four behaviours are rarely if ever independent and two or more are nearly always happening simultaneously.<sup>7</sup>

Next I will review the major developments of David Grove's methodology as a way to explain how he, Penny Tompkins and I, and others have made use of these four behaviours to invoke psychoactivity.

### **#1 - Processes that Start with Moving Attention**

Throughout the 1980s David Grove originated therapeutic methodologies using Clean Language. These created a psychoactive space through the movement of the client's attention to different places in their mind-body. The client sat in one place, often with their eyes closed, and responded to a feeling, a memory or an imaginary Metaphor Landscape.<sup>8</sup>

Although questions like "And where is ...?" encourage clients to be explicit about their spatial experience, all clean questions require the client to search for information and invite the client to 'go somewhere' to access it. A classic example of utilising a **#1** way of invoking psychoactive space is David's 'From a Feeling to a Metaphor' routine:<sup>9</sup>

A client says something equivalent to: "I feel [ ]."

The facilitator continues with the following three-step process:

1. Identify the precise location of the feeling by asking a 'where' question three times, e.g.

And when you feel [ ], where is that [ ]?

And whereabouts [location of feeling]?

And whereabouts [location of feeling]?

2. Identify the form of the feeling:

And when [ ] is [location of feeling], ...

... what kind of [ ] is that [ ]?

... is there anything about that [ ]?

... does that [ ] have a size or a shape?

3. If the client is not yet describing a metaphor, invite them to convert to a metaphor by asking:

And when [description of feeling] is [location of feeling], that's [description of feeling] like what?

David was acutely aware of space even in the early days. He called his early work 'Child Within' and in particular distinguished between symbols that the client reported were inside or outside a body. That body could be the physical body of the client or the symbolic body of a child within. It got a little complicated when a "nested child within" appeared -- a symbolic child within a child within! This is a vivid example of utilising the container metaphor mentioned above.

David observed that when clients drew their metaphors after a session it gave them a different way to interact with their symbols; and they could continue to discover things about themselves (self-model) on their own. Here **#1** was followed by a **#4** way of creating a physical psychoactive space.<sup>10</sup>

The physical mapping of symbols uses space in at least two ways:

First and most obvious, multiple symbols have to be placed in different locations on the paper and this automatically creates spatial relationships between them. One could say God created space to stop everything happening in the same place.

Secondly, because physical symbols are much more permanent than interior symbols they massively increase the number that can be considered simultaneously. Merlin Donald in *A Mind So Rare* points out that, in the beginning, "Michelangelo himself could never have imagined the finished panorama of the Sistine Chapel ... the totality of the final result exceeds the reach of any imagination because it simply goes beyond the limits of basic capacity." (p. 313-4) Donald calls such use of exterior space an "external memory field".

David Grove realised that he could incorporate the fascinating interplay between mind space and physical space into his work. At his one-time retreat centre in Eldon, Missouri for example, he created physical places such as a cave and a lake that simulated the contexts common to many of his client's metaphors. If a client's symbolic child was situated in a wood, in a cave, on an expanse of water, or in a boat, sessions were conducted at places that matched the client's imaginative landscape. Creating a physical simulation of a metaphor is another way to convert the interior product of **#1** into an exterior representation, **#4**.

Later David invited clients to physicalise their interior landscape in several other ways. He extended his earlier idea (of having ready-made physical places available for sessions), to assigning clients the task (between sessions) of finding a physical space that simulated their Metaphor Landscape. Once they had placed themselves in the correct perspective to their surroundings they enacted their metaphor in that space. Then they experimented by doing something different and noticed

what happened; e.g. to walk backwards; to cross to the other side of a valley; to view an obstacle from a different perspective; or to just sit and wait to see what happens. (Penny Tompkins and I spent many an informative hour exploring places in the English Lake District that replicated our personal Metaphor Landscapes.)

Sometimes David also suggested that clients visit the real places that appeared in their Landscape. For instance, during an Intergenerational Healing process a client strongly connected with Uzbekistan, his ancestral homeland. He decided to visit Uzbekistan for the first time as a way to discover what happened when he was physically in the space of his ancestors.

In these last two examples the client establishes an interior space, **#1**. Then they find a place that matches their imaginative Landscape, **#4**, and follow that by moving around that physical space, **#3**.

## **#2 - Processes that Start with Moving Part of the Body**

David Grove likened the rhythm, precision and elegance with which the body utilises surrounding space to "choreography". He invented a number of clean questions that made use of clients' lines of sight, gestures and other ways the body relates to physical and imaginative space:

And where are you going when you go there?

And where are you drawn to?

And what kind of [nonverbal] is that?

And what does that [nonverbal/body part] know?

Chapters 4 and 5 of <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/pages/Book-Metaphors-in-Mind.html>">Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling describe in detail how to utilise several **#2** processes to establish a psychoactive space.<sup>11</sup>

As time went by David asked his clients to produce more and more extensive representations of their Metaphor Landscape -- mostly by drawings but also by collage, sculpture and building models. A typical session would start with an investigation of some **#2** behaviour. This would extend into the creation of a **#1** Metaphor Landscape. Sometimes the client would then enact their metaphors by moving around their Landscape, **#3**. (One client whose metaphor involved horse riding spent most of her session clip-clopping around the room riding her metaphorical horse while answering David's questions.) Between sessions clients would physicalise their metaphors by drawing or some other **#4** behaviour. At the next session clients would then present their maps to David and the whole sequence would be repeated.\*

At other times clients would take the perspective of different perceivers. During my own work with David I discovered that my metaphor for life was like walking across a plain towards some distant mountains. To my surprise I found that an old, wise native American indian had long been observing me from a cliff top behind and high above. When I physically moved to sit in the position of the indian I was shocked. Not only could I see where he (me down there) had come from and was going, but for the first time I also felt a strong sense of detached compassion for myself. I could see his predicament down there and how it reflected an aspect of the human condition. Yet I knew my role up here was just to observe. I had no desire to rescue or make things better. I sat there with a calm assurity, knowing that what will be will be. I know that I would not have had

such a pure experience if I had not physically moved to a place that symbolised the position of the overseer high up on a cliff top.

### **#3 - Processes that Start with Moving the Whole Body**

By the mid-1990s David Grove had realised that we are always attempting to arrange our physical and mind spaces so they are compatible, although this happens mostly out of awareness. To respect this he began to initiate each session by asking the client "And where would you like to be?". When the client had situated him or herself, David asked "And where would you like me to be?".

From the outset these questions facilitate the client to intuitively orientate their body (and hence their interior landscape) to the exterior world. Some clients take several minutes to find just the right spot and then they position the therapist with millimetre precision.<sup>12</sup> Once the spatial relationships of the client, environment and therapist are established the exploration of the client's perceptual space can begin. This is an example of **#3** behaviour followed by utilising **#1** behaviour to further establish the psychoactivity of the space around and within the client's body.

In the last few years, David has been experimenting with another whole-body-space process called Clean Space. In its original form the client starts by writing and placing a "Mission Statement" where it needs to be, and then placing themselves where they need to be in relation to the statement. They are then repeatedly instructed to "Find a space that knows about ...". The act of moving from one location to another defines the space within which the client works, while what they discover at each location defines the content of the session. As the network of locations and perspectives is created the physical space becomes psychoactive in an emergent and systemic manner.<sup>13</sup>

Although Clean Space starts as a **#3** methodology, when the client stands in particular places their body will often unconsciously orientate to the surrounding space (including the configuration of other locations they have established), **#2**. At some point the client begins to notice patterns in the configuration of the spaces they have defined (this can be as simple as lines, shapes and angles; or as complex as walls, islands, worlds, etc.) and hey presto, a Metaphor Landscape emerges, **#1**.

At certain places David will invite the client to turn slowly through 360 degrees reporting what they notice at each arc of the turn. He may ask them to continue turning in that direction so they complete several revolutions; or he may ask them to reverse the direction of turning. I have seen this have a profound effect on some clients. David is utilising changes in the body's orientation to its surrounding environment to effect change in the client's interior landscape. I believe this works because they are not just moving through physical space but turning through a previously self-generated psychoactive landscape.

### **#4 - Processes that Start with Physicalising**

For many years Penny Tompkins and I have asked clients to bring two drawings of metaphors to their first session; one for "How it is now" and one for "How you would like it to be". After the client describes their drawings we facilitate them to 'come off the map' by locating their symbols in their perceptual space in order to activate the psychoactivity of that space. This is **#4** followed by **#1**.

Charles Faulkner devised a very simple but clever workshop exercise which used a reverse of **#4** behaviour as a way of establishing the architecture of a person's imaginative landscape. It was based on the premise that a person's response to their environment is a guide to the attributes

of their interior world. Pairs of participants wandered around a university campus where the workshop was taking place. One described what they liked or didn't like about the architecture and layout of the buildings and space. Their partner noted down their description and especially their metaphors. Then the roles were reversed. When they returned to the workshop room each person listened to their own descriptions of actual physical places and considered how much these were an example of more general patterns of their preferences. In so doing they discovered some of the characteristics of their own Metaphor Landscape.

In the late 1990s David Grove started experimenting with having clients write statements that were significant for them on a flip chart. As well as exploring the symbology in the form of the writing -- the shape of the letters, misspellings, etc. -- he also examined the significance of the relative location of certain words, gaps, punctuation and other marks on the paper. In a precursor to Clean Space, David began the graphological investigation once the client had placed the sheet of paper somewhere in the room and then placed themselves in relation to it.

A practice group exercise I devised is another example of #4 leading to #1. The client is asked "And what would you like to have happen?" They write their answer on a large piece of paper which they cut up so that each word of their statement is on a separate piece. The client starts by reconstructing their statement like a jigsaw. Then they are instructed to perform a number of operations using the words and notice the effect. For example they are asked to: view the sentence from different places and heights; spread the words out so there is more and more space between them; change the order of the words; remove words one at a time until there is only one word left. After each operation they are facilitated using Clean Language to describe how their relationship to their original statement changes.

### **Some Concluding Comments**

Even the simplest act, such as picking up a cup, requires us to establish a finely-tuned feedback loop with physical space. When dreaming or in a deep trance, however, we are almost exclusively relating to metaphorical space. In between, every other conscious activity seems to involve a mostly unconscious *blending* of metaphorical and physical space.<sup>14</sup>

Without the ability to seamlessly blend physical and metaphorical space and to attach symbolic significance to some of those spatial relations, I doubt our complex social life could have evolved. Equally the complexities of social life demanded we develop these abilities. This is not a problem of 'Which came first, the chicken or the egg?' but an example of co-evolution.

Given its importance, it might seem surprising that everyday conversations rarely foster the psychoactivity of space. This is for three main reasons. First our perceptual space is rarely acknowledged as existing or meaningful. Second, our perceptual space is constantly being occupied by other people's symbols and gestures, albeit unwittingly. Third, and simultaneously, our attention is forever being drawn away from our own perceptual space and towards another, alien perceptual space.

One of the fundamental purposes of clean facilitation is for the facilitator to physically, metaphorically and energetically 'keep out' of a client's perceptual space so it can become psychoactive.

Put the other way round, clean facilitation creates conditions conducive for the emergence and maintenance of a client's psychoactive space. This happens when the facilitator makes the configuration of the client's perceptual space the primary content of their (the facilitator's)



Metaphor Landscape. This does not mean adopting the client's perspective, i.e. 'standing in their shoes'; 'Second Position' as it is known in NLP is just one of many perspectives which the facilitator considers while modelling. Rather the facilitator's default perspective will lie somewhere outside the client's perceptual space. This has to be a dynamic perspective because the extent of the client's imaginary space can change from moment to moment.<sup>15</sup>

Whether the client works *Inside-Out* by first developing the psychoactivity of their interior Landscape, **#1**; and then externalises its features through gestures and lines of sight, **#2**; or moves around, **#3**; or maps, **#4** -- or it happens the other way round, *Outside-In* -- your aim as a facilitator remains the same: for the client to become aware that the way they naturally make use of their interior and exterior space can establish a high-quality feedback loop about how they relate to the world in general.

The way we configure our perceptual space is fundamental to the way we organise our experience. Our hopes, fears, desires and decisions depend on the architecture of our mind-body space. Our psychoactive relationship with that space is one of the primary ways we know it has significance for us. Just as the invention of the arch, steel girders and concrete changed the kind of buildings we could build, so changes to the way we construct our perceptual space can have profound implications for the way we live our life, the way we relate to others, and to the very meaning and purpose of our existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Jaynes was one of the first to make this explicit in *Origin of Consciousness*. See also Gregory Bateson, Maturana & Varela, Daniel Dennett, Lakoff & Johnson, Paul Watzlavick, Gerald Edelman or any of the growing band of "experiential constructivists".

<sup>2</sup> Many of the 'submodality' techniques originated by Richard Bandler and others make use of these near universal metaphors. See also Lucas Derk, *Social Panorama*, for a comprehensive discussion of how we use spatial relations to encode personal relationships.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of modelling the spatial relations of a metaphor, see our article "[A Model of Musing](#)". Also see Seth Lindstromberg's brilliant *English Prepositions Explained*.

<sup>4</sup> See: Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson *Metaphors We Live By*, and *Philosophy in The Flesh*; and Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*.

<sup>5</sup> I include language under movement of attention because language and attention are inseparable. Comprehension requires us to continually shift our attention to make meaning of the words. Merlin Donald in *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* states that initially it works the other way around; the complex learning required for language is dependent on a child learning to adapt their attention to the people and activity around them.

<sup>6</sup> While this is commonly conceived of as 'body language' it is likely that its primary purpose is to assist a person to think, feel and make decisions. Because there are consistent relationships between external behaviour and internal perception, others can observe and interpret these movements and use them as a form of communication.

<sup>7</sup> It is also possible for sound to create a psychoactive space. For example the invention of 'surround sound' has been utilised by horror film makers to create psychoactive spatial effects. Richard Bandler has put the effect of sound and space to therapeutic ends with his Design Human Engineering process.

<sup>8</sup> *Resolving Traumatic Memories*, David Grove and Bazil Panzer (Irvington, 1989) and David's out-of-print series of audio and video cassettes.

<sup>9</sup> This space usually exists within or on the surface of a client's body -- but not always, because some clients experience feelings outside their body. One of David Grove's great contributions is that his processes make it perfectly ok for clients to acknowledge when they have 'strange' or out-of-the-ordinary perceptions.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Richard Feynman, the nobel prize winning physicist, considered paper an extension of his mind. He was adamant that he didn't think a thought and then put it on paper, he "worked" a thought on the paper itself. As reported in James Gleick's biography of Richard Feynman, *Genius*.

<sup>11</sup> James Lawley & Penny Tompkins (Developing Co, 2000). Also see our article "[Clean Language without Words](#)" *Rapport*, Issue 43, Spring 1999.

<sup>12</sup> This is reminiscent of the shaman, Don Juan asking Carlos Castenada to find his "power place".

<sup>13</sup> For a description of the basic Clean Space process, see our article "[Clean Space: Modeling human perception through emergence](#)" in *Anchor Point*, Vol. 17, No. 8, September 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*, Basic Books, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> For more on modelling the client's information rather than the client, see our article [Modelling Background Knowledge](#) in *Rapport*, Issue 39, Spring 1998.

## Postscript

\* "As this map becomes 'psycho-active' its elements begin to evolve and once the mapping process has started it may continue with very little interaction by the therapist." see David Grove's [Problem Domains And Non-Traumatic Resolution Through Metaphor Therapy](#).



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