

Unpacking Safe Uncertainty

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A Principle

THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCESSIBLE COMPLEXITY

whether it be clinical work, supervision, training or writing

(Mason 2016)

Going beyond what we think we are capable of

from The Trial of God - Elie Wiesel (1979)

Berish: the innkeeper(re courage). Do you have the courage to “go to the end of things - and utter words no one has ever uttered before? And ask questions no one has dared ask before? And give answers no one has ever had the courage to articulate before?”

The Social Graces (Burnham 1992, 2012; Roper-Hall, 1998) are helpful through assisting practitioners to be:

“mindful about a range of differences and generating a desire to extend their practice beyond their current abilities (Burnham, Alvis Palma and Whitehouse, 2008 p.530).

Diane Arbus
Photographer
1923-1971

“My favourite thing is to go where I’ve never been.”

“Take pictures of what you fear.”

- What issues, themes, feelings might you be pulling back from addressing
- How do you explain why this process of ‘pulling back from addressing’ is occurring.
- (Mason, 2002)

A word about language

Beware of the overuse of the verb - to be (Palazzoli et al, 1980)

That is: he is difficult

Rather: I find him difficult

The latter is relational language. As Lynn Hoffman (1993) once said - the minimum unit for consideration should be a dyad. Once you say "I find him difficult" we have constructed a dyad and it then leads to us asking ourselves (as part of your clinical approach): "How come I find him difficult?" This is a self-reflexive position which may lead us to exploring patterns within our own personal history which may be aiding and/or constraining our professional task. Another part of the professional task is to help clients become more self-reflexive. If our clients can become more self reflexive I believe they are more likely to find positions of safe uncertainty.

Two ideas from systems theory that particularly influence me

- There are different ways of seeing
- the notion of mutual influence
(Weiner, 1948;1953) NB: not equal
influence

Some comments about respect and power

- I respect your beliefs can sometimes be an unhelpful mantra. To be honest I don't respect everyone's beliefs and I wouldn't expect everyone to respect all of mine. But I try to respectfully engage with different beliefs and understand the stories of how these beliefs have emerged. Perhaps better to hold a position of respectful irreverence
- An uncritical reverence can contribute to the creation of a context where abuse is more likely to occur - e.g. Irish reports (see Cloyne Report, 2011) into the endemic clerical rape and abuse of children and vulnerable adults; Jimmy Saville; Rolf Harris.
- As people with power we have a responsibility to help people feel that they can challenge us. Clients “invest in us a constructive ownership of power...” (Young et al, 1999). And as part of a collaborative approach it is important for us to open ourselves up to being challenged.

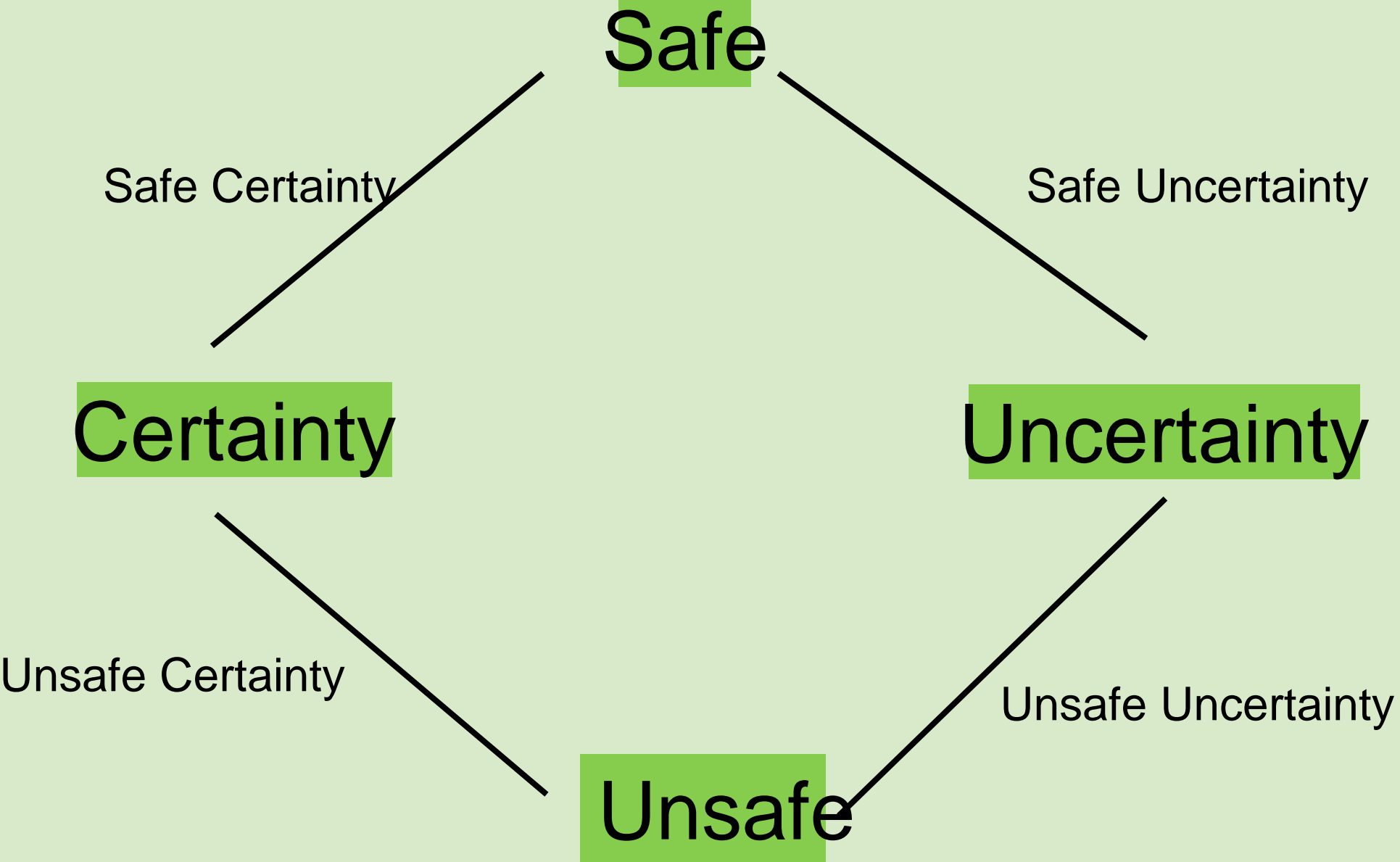


A definition of change

- 1. For useful change to happen we sometimes need to become less certain of the positions we hold. When we become less certain of the positions we hold we are more likely to become receptive to other possibilities, other meanings we might put to events. If we can become more open to the possible influence of other perspectives, we open up space for other views to be stated and heard.

- Mason, B. (1992, 2002, 2009)

Towards Positions of Safe Uncertainty





An Equation for Change

Change
=
A Commitment to Experimenting with Difference
+
Action
+
Repetition
+
Time

(Mason, 2010)

The Elephant in the Room

- BM: Do you have a concern that your wife is going to have another heart attack, stop breathing, drop dead?
- J: It's on my mind all the time
- BM: Is that something you keep to yourself?
- J: Yes
- BM: What's it like me asking you that question

- J: To ask it and to answer it is a relief. You've asked it and I've answered it and I do find a relief from answering it.
- BM: Tell me in what way it's a relief
- J: To hear myself say it out loud and for my wife (*sitting next to him*) to hear it. It's always on my mind.

- BM: What prevented you from saying it before?
- J: Oh I don't know. You keep it to yourself. If you say it to someone else you're giving it to someone else.

- BM (to Mrs A): What's it been like for you hearing your husband say it's a relief to say these things.
- Mrs A: It makes a big difference. (*And then she said, somewhat sadly*) I didn't know he cared.

Taking relational risks - a family interview

Family of four. Mother, Joan; father, David; daughter (Elaine) 15, son (Tom) 12 (mother in chronic pain, and the daughter also has a chronic pain condition)

BM: Keeping things together seems to be very important to you because of things that happened in your family when you were growing up. Is that right?

Mother: Yes. It's just coping day to day, because some days I I feel I can't cope. physically or emotionally. I just feel I'll blow.

BM: What would that mean. When you think of the worst case scenario and you think about things blowing what do you see actually happening? And what do you think is the effect on the others in your family of you saying that. Do they know that? Have you said that to them?

(poor interviewing! Too many questions at once)

Father She's said it before.

Mother: No. I've just said I can't cope; I'm going to explode. It's like I'm winding, winding and winding. With the coping, you know I've been able to keep it at bay because I've been looking at the future thinking I will get better and thinking something could be done.

But now it's the not knowing. It's how much longer can I keep going. How much longer can I sustain going on as we are.

BM: What's your guess? How much longer can you go on?
(relational risk-taking to encourage relational risk-taking)

Mother: I try to put it to the back of my mind.

Me: I sense the way you talk about it that it is a great worry for you.

Mother: Yes

Me: Do you think they (the family) know that?

Mother: They realise that. I do say I've had enough

Me: So when you say "I've had enough" what do you think they understand by that.

Mother: They know it's because of the pain.

Me: But what do they think?

Father: I think I know what she means but I don't want to say

Me: Ok, I'm not going to push you but what would your concern be about saying?

Father: Well, you know, not with the kids here, you know, but I know what she means.

Me: to children - what do you think when your mum says what she's said.? Why do you think your dad said: "I'm not going to say."

Elaine: I think sometimes she wants to end her life

Me: How long have you felt that

Elaine: Since I was about 10

Elaine: Since I was about 10

Mother: Oh my God! That long ago?

Elaine: Yes. When I had to call for an ambulance for you.

Me: To Elaine: I get the sense that when you said that, it was quite hard for you to say. You've never said that to your mum before?

Elaine: No

Me: That's pretty brave.

Father: She says what she feels, our Elaine.

Mother: But she keeps things back if she feels she's going to upset somebody.

Me: (To Elaine) What does it feel like to have said that?

Elaine: Brilliant.