

Protecting the Client Experience: A Catastrophe Theory Map of Civic Accountability in the Psychological Therapies

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ABSTRACT *Drawing on catastrophe theory, it is proposed that the way in which practitioners balance self-responsibility with external responsibility in the presence of coercion and threat explains a range of civic accountability behaviours in the psychological therapies, defined by levels of values congruence. If the level of coercion and threat is severe, for example from the state, practitioners are likely to congregate in two divergent groups where core values of the field are either honoured or compromised. So far as practitioners draw on their capability for emotional competence to hold coercion and threat minimized, the map points to a third civic accountability option that can balance external and self-responsibility. The catastrophe theory map supports the premise that erosion of practitioners' values due to the coercion and threat that implementation of state regulation entails will harm the experience of psychological therapy clients. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: catastrophe theory, civic accountability, emotional competence, therapy regulation

How, as psychological therapy practitioners, do we meet clients where they need to be met? How do we sustain this contact over time? How do we meet them with an effective level of capability, a mix of knowledge, experience and *mêtis*? (*Mêtis* – the mix of experience, skill and knowledge that piloting a ship or flying a glider entails.)

Holding responsibility for all this is a necessary and essential part of practitioner life. Through informal action research with the Independent Practitioners Network and as the result of a private challenge by the founder of POPAN, Jenny Faisal, I have come to see this responsibility as a matter of civic accountability.

This article looks first at the key influences that shape the choices of civic accountability in the psychological therapy field. It then puts them together in a catastrophe theory (CT)

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map that provides an aid to intuition in understanding the consequences of state regulation across the field.

How might we approach picturing the range of civic accountability options? What drives them? What attracts us to one choice or another?

If we were looking for a quality present in all considerations of what would count as civic accountability for the psychological field – the ‘dynamic’ of the field – what would merit consideration? Money could perhaps be one option. Caring for troubled people might be another.

I am going to base this exploration of civic accountability on what I believe to be the over-arching dynamic of our field – *values*. It is not feasible to become a psycho-practitioner without a diligent study of the values we bring to the work with clients; ethical values are built into this work. They are not some decoration or badge of office. This means there can be no value-free psycho-practice. As soon as psycho-practice trainees encounter the notions of transference and projection, and so forth, coupled with the range of models of human functioning that they are learning to deploy, they begin to understand that value-free psycho-practice is an impossibility. For this reason our values are overwhelmingly likely to shape how we approach civic accountability.

Ordinarily, the range of forms of civic accountability for the psycho-practice work occupies a spectrum that runs from *external responsibility*, determined externally through qualification, employment contracts, and membership of accrediting bodies, to *self-responsibility*, where we personally vouch for the work we do with clients.

Ordinarily, most practitioners will have developed, via their history, education, supervision, continuing personal and professional development, a cluster of values that make certain styles of civic accountability attractive and others less so. For example, I may feel that my values as a practitioner are best expressed through belonging to a group deriving from where I trained.

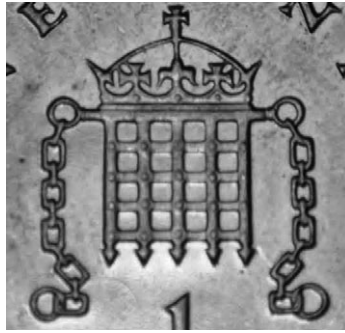
Ordinarily, while this civic accountability posture may be strongly held, I am free to vary in either direction the balance between external and self-responsibility, in a way that is congruent with my values and that may change as I change and develop.

Ordinarily, the most fundamental value of ethically aware psycho-practice is that client work should be free from coercion, i.e. a working alliance rooted in cooperation and inquiry. Non-medical work with the human condition rejects force, coercion and treatment of pathology in favour of power-with relations; being a loving midwife for flourishing, for what is seeking to be born, survived or recovered in clients.

Much, perhaps most, client abuse can be understood as arising from coercion or the use of force, whether overt or covert, from the practitioner side of the relationship. The common factor in client abuse – exploitation of vulnerability, whether sexual, mental or financial, appears to be the assumption that dominance, i.e. ‘power-over’ relations, is acceptable.

But wait a moment. If a high value in practitioner/client style is freedom from coercion and force, then wouldn’t a significant level of external responsibility, if it is founded in coercion and the use or threat of force, compromise this, resulting in values incongruence? By contrast, isn’t self-responsibility more likely to support high values congruence?

Enter the state. A common definition of what counts as a state is that it has a monopoly on the legal use of force. In the UK this is well expressed through the image on the back of the penny coin, the parliamentary emblem, a crowned portcullis with chains and manacles.



However benign the intention, the currently proposed state regulation of the psychological therapies in the UK stands on a foundation of the use of coercion. Coupled with the force of legal sanctions it will make the unregistered use of certain yet-to-be-defined psycho-practice titles a criminal act with a £5,000 penalty.

Through these plans for regulation, the state adds the ingredient of force and coercion to the culture of the psychological therapies. And to the range of civic accountability options.

Some people, entranced by the wide acceptance in our culture that dominance and subordination are ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’, may not find this troubling. Practitioners more savvy to how the use and abuse of power affects them and their client work may be interested to appreciate how the state’s role promises to shape the civic accountability behaviour of the field.

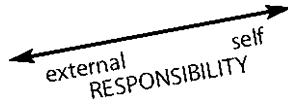
One of the effects of the over-bright light of the modernist research paradigms that are so beloved in medicine and the UK Department of Health is that they can blind us to more relevant qualitative aids to intuition, which do not depend on measurement and statistics. One such aid is CT, a model that is relatively accessible to non-mathematical mortals. Catastrophe theory is a development of the work of mathematician René Thom (Professor of Mathematics at the Institut des Hautes Etude Scientifiques, a distinguished French mathematician, a Fields Medalist, the equivalent in mathematics of the Nobel prize, and author of *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis* (Thom, 1976)), and Professor Sir Christopher Zeeman, FRS. It provides a valuable way of displaying the unfolding of events in a field such as the psychological therapies.

The author’s connection with catastrophe theory arose from making a BBC TV *Horizon* series programme, ‘Happy Catastrophe’, broadcast on 28 July 1975, with Professor Zeeman, then of Warwick University Mathematics Department. Production of the film was followed by publication of the author’s introduction to catastrophe theory (Postle, 1980; see also Hampden-Turner, 1981). Christopher Zeeman, who has a reputation for making mathematics accessible to a wider audience, verified line by line the four introductory chapters of this book.

Catastrophe theory provides support for intuition that can be both powerful and elaborate and I am only going to introduce a few of its descriptive facilities – the unfolding of conditions in processes where splitting occurs, behavioural trajectories as underlying influences change, and how splitting can be transcended. (Splitting can be transcended but, in the presence of coercion and force, not eliminated: see the butterfly catastrophe model below.)

Catastrophe theory enables us to lay out for inspection how existing approaches to civic accountability are affected by the arrival of coercion and the threat of force through regulation by the state and especially how it affects the *values congruence* of practitioners.

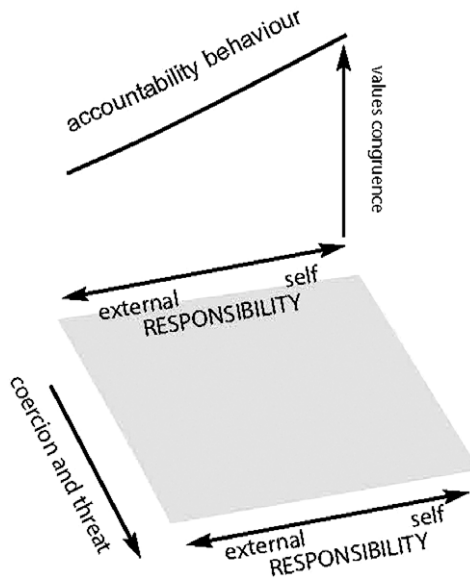
In catastrophe theory the ability to range freely between the two extremes of civic accountability self- and external responsibility constitutes a ‘normal factor’.



Here it is running from left to right across the page.



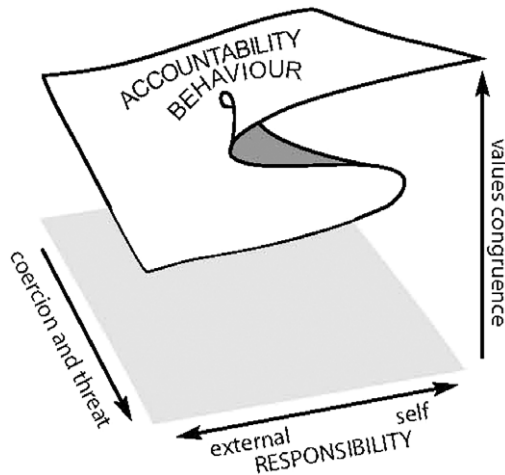
The more responsible I am for my civic accountability the more it will be in accord with my practitioner values. The more I cede responsibility for my civic accountability to some external agency the less my civic accountability behaviour is likely to match my practitioner values. We now have a simple two-dimensional graph. The extent to which my civic accountability behaviour is congruent with my practitioner values varies according to whether responsibility is assigned to self or external authority.



But now we add a second factor or influence on our accountability behaviour to the assignment of responsibility. Ranged independently of it is coercion and the threat of force due for example, to regulation by, or on behalf of, the state. In CT this is a ‘splitting factor’ – the more it influences behaviour, the more behaviour splits in either/or ways.

It is a feature of CT that these two types of factor or influence combine to generate a unique three-dimensional ‘behaviour surface’ or, if you like, a three-dimensional graph. (There is a very precise dynamic computer graphic of the Catastrophe Theory surfaces at Lucien Dujardin’s Catastrophe Teacher Web site: http://pagesperso-orange.fr/l.d.v.dujardin/ct/elem_fronce.html.) This ‘behaviour surface’ folds in a unique way, a ‘cusp’ catastrophe.

The cusp catastrophe is one of only seven ways of modelling all the discontinuities of nature ... CT is a very successful classification of graphs. René Thom has shown that there are only a relatively small number of ingredients from which graphs can be made and that however complex the apparent influences on a system’s behaviour providing the system obeys some minimizing principle dependent on space and time (in the sense that we minimize the cost of purchases and the time of journeys) all the discontinuities of nature can be modelled by graphs with only seven types of local ingredient. (Postle, 1980, 20)

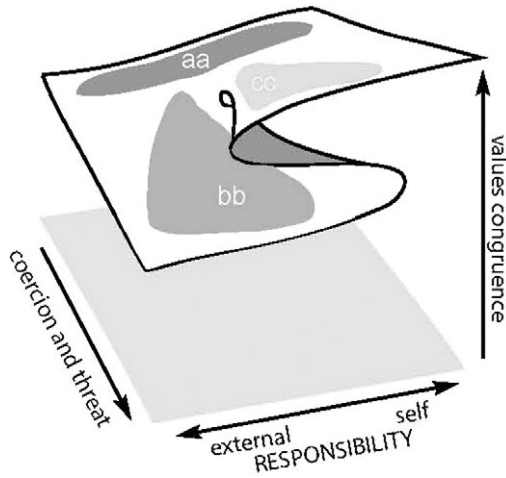


In our present example behaviour splits into two sheets, with an inaccessible area in between, one of a high level of values congruence and the other of a low value. Catastrophe theory mathematics shows that the behaviour corresponding to the middle sheet of the behaviour surface is so improbable it can be ignored.

To summarize, the graph represents the range of varieties of civic accountability (behaviour) corresponding to the interaction of weak to strong levels of coercion and the threat of force, with how practitioners choose to assign responsibility. The vertical dimension of the graph indicates variations in values congruence across this range of behaviour.

What might this suggest about state regulation of the psychological therapies?

Ordinarily, at the back of the map, at aa, with no or low coercion, practitioners can vary smoothly between external and self responsibility.

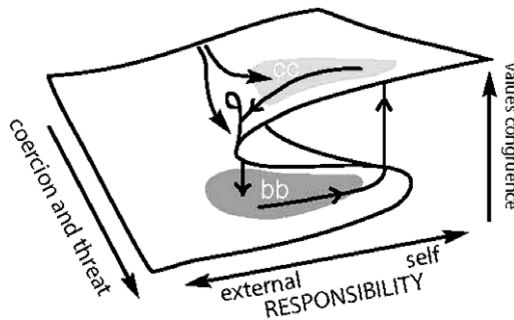


The introduction of force and coercion splits the choices of civic accountability, with the middle absent and giving rise to twin experiences of ambivalence, each shaped by how the threat and coercion of state regulation touches your values.

On the upper sheet of the CT map, at cc, ambivalence probably varies between confidence that core values are being retained, and feelings of exclusion from the benefits of state regulation, such as status and recognition. On the lower sheet, at bb, ambivalence is likely to include wrestling with the discomfort of compromised core values and enhanced status.

If this is how the dynamics of the psychological therapies are affected by state regulation, what room is there for manoeuvre?

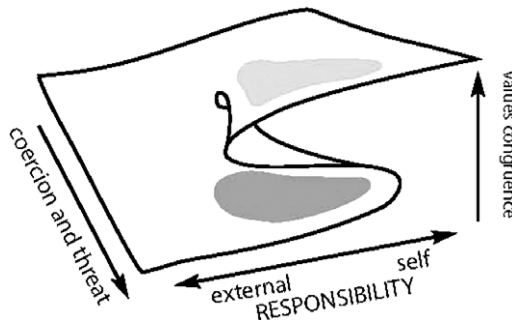
If you are in private practice with a strongly expressed attitude of self-responsibility for civic accountability in your work then, as the state applies coercion to install external responsibility for civic accountability, you will be faced with a choice of staying on the upper, ethical preferable territory of high values congruence, cc, or compromising this quality with a move in the direction of the state's definition of civic accountability. The map handily represents this as a cusp-shaped edge of discontinuity (if we look at the behaviour surface from above, the edges where discontinuity arises form a cusp shape). Moving in the direction of external responsibility eventually takes you off the upper edge to the lower sheet, with a catastrophic collapse in the levels of values congruence.



If, as a practitioner, you have had the choice of state-regulated civic accountability made for you, perhaps as a condition of employment, but find it unliveable, expect a long struggle, across the bottom sheet of low values incongruence, bb, in the direction of self-responsibility, which very likely includes quitting the regulated work before you can reach the other side of the cusp and jump onto the high value-congruence sheet.

Once in the low values-congruence, state-administered, civic accountability behaviour zone, leaving it for self-responsibility is likely to seem impossibly difficult. Similarly practitioners who have been accustomed to self-responsibility will find moving to a high level of external responsibility and its correspondingly low values congruence highly aversive.

In practice, as the state's invasion and capture of the psychological therapies unfolds, practitioners are likely to congregate in two stable states of civic accountability. Both strike a balance between external and self responsibility – one inside the state regulation and one outside, represented respectively by the middle areas of the upper and lower sheets of the behaviour surface.



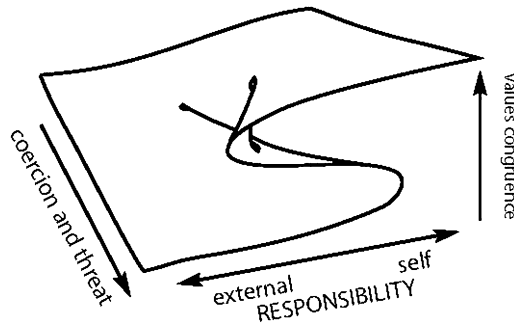
As far as we choose to use a state-regulated title, the CT map shows that this will mean inhabiting the low values-congruence state-regulated sector of the map.

However a note of caution: civic responsibility based on comprehensive self-responsibility, with the considerable attraction of high values congruence, may seem ideal. But so far as it excludes all external influences it is unlikely to honour the need for client work to be awarably held in a social context.

The experience of the two zones will be likely to be very different; the lower zone with compromised values congruence; the upper zone with values congruence intact. The model, of course, says nothing about how many practitioners will occupy which zone. Each zone comes at a price. Both high, if very different. Survival on the upper sheet probably requires the agility and initiative of a dissident outsider; the lower sheet would seem to require some level of denial or lack of awareness of what may have been lost through state regulation; and/or a cynical embrace of the false compliance that may be necessary for survival as a psycho-practitioner for example in the NHS family.

Is this all? Well no, you have probably noticed that there is a missing middle in the map, an area where CT says behaviour is so improbable that it can be ignored. Another in the CT family of surfaces, arising from the addition of a fourth, 'butterfly factor', provides a way in which the missing middle of the cusp catastrophe surface graph can be transcended. This generates a 'butterfly' catastrophe surface, which features a narrow and somewhat

unstable sheet centred around the balance between self- and external responsibility. To draw this with four control dimensions and one dimension of behaviour we would need a five dimensional drawing! However if the four control dimensions are reduced to two by holding two of them constant, then we can draw a version of the butterfly.



How can such a butterfly factor be generated? It requires a third factor independent of 'coercion' and 'responsibility'. During several years of very intense groupwork-based facilitation training that I co-ran in the 1990s, there were occasionally moments, even whole mornings, of synergy when decision making in the group and group process flowed effortlessly; when the group was intensely focused yet relaxed and which was often profoundly moving.

What was the facilitative ingredient that generated such periods in the group that seemed deserving of the being called synergy? After long reflection I came to understand that they were probably due to the increasing emotional competence (Postle, 2006, 2008) of group participants. What was then a quite rare phenomenon has subsequently seemed widely and commonly accessible, for example in the culture of the Independent Practitioners Network (IPN), both in the group I belong to, and in IPN gatherings.

In our CT context, emotional competence corresponds to a 'butterfly' factor independent of force and responsibility. Among other things, emotional competence enables continuous awareness and interruption of dominance/coercion and trust sufficient for openness to full disclosure scrutiny by colleagues of any life/practice issues that might limit or deform work with clients, and which if attended to will enhance practitioner-client flourishing. If this coercion-free culture is held present in a population of practitioners, a 'butterfly' sheet of civic accountability behaviour can emerge that honours both external and self-responsibility with moderate levels of values congruence. The introduction of an integrative capability such as emotional competence enables the restoration of moderate levels of values congruence in the presence of coercion and threat.

Because this 'butterfly' form of civic accountability is permanently in a condition of being made and remade, its processes are open to revision and innovation. Along with sufficient emotional competence, it is demanding of available time and commitment to a non-coercive, non-hierarchical decision-making culture. All of these are essential in building the trust that full disclosure (or, as psychoanalysts might argue, adequate self-disclosure) requires, ultimately the only reliable source of support for clients' interests.

CONCLUSIONS

What does all this tell us? That while ostensibly seeking to create a unified, accessible, standardized form of psychological help, the coercive nature of state regulation irrevocably splits the field; that civic accountability based on the coercive state enforcement of external responsibility brings with it values incongruence that will become deeply embedded both in the daily practice of the psychological therapies and in future trainings. How can this fail to affect the client experience adversely?

The CT map also accounts for the strong ambivalence that many practitioners feel about state regulation (perhaps they are still inhabitants of the back of the surface who are intuitively aware of the prospect of the coming split as SR becomes installed). For practitioners who presently have a version of civic accountability in place that balances external and self-responsibility, the CT map also accounts for the alarm or ambivalence many feel at the prospect of signing up to a civic accountability dominated by the state, with the collapse of values congruence that it entails.

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