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## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

### **(Im)possibility and the Pragmatics of Empowerment**

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*Award date:*  
2008

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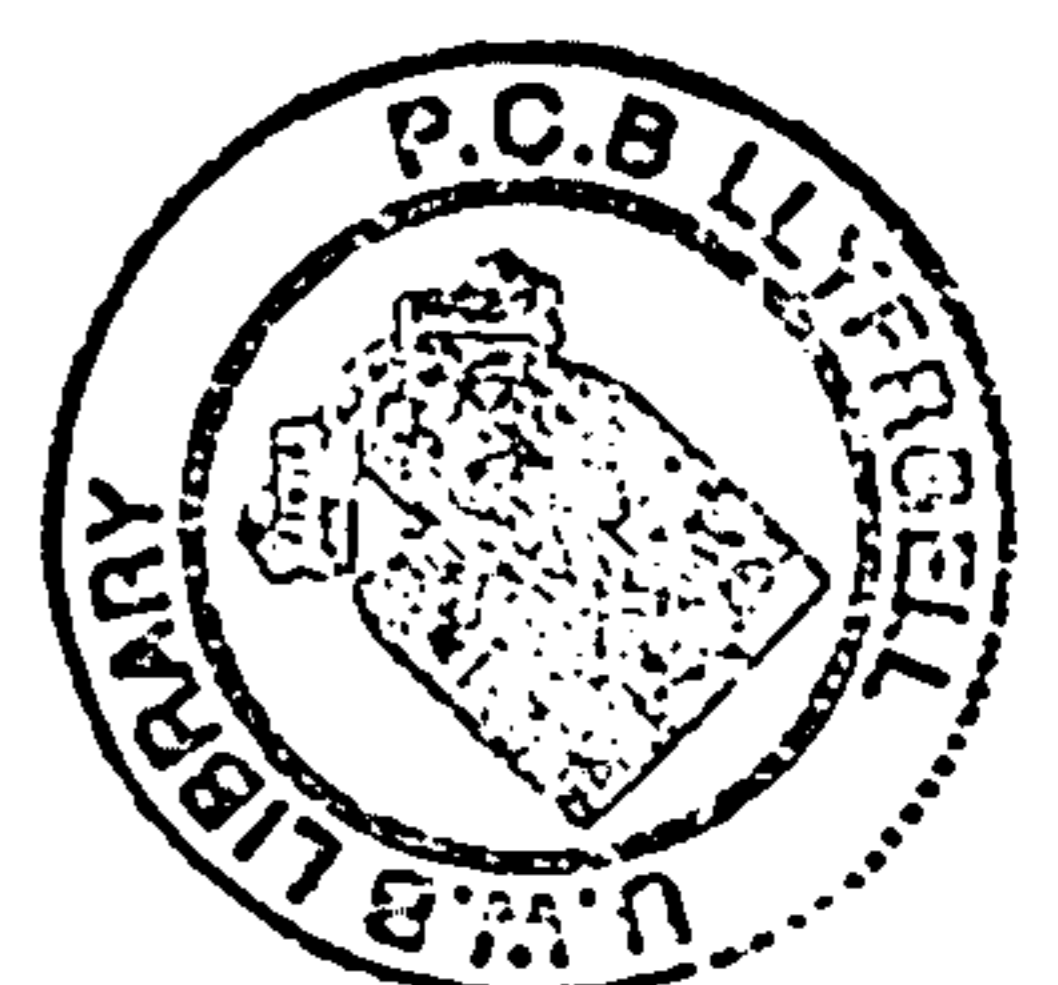
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# **(Im)possibility and the Pragmatics of Empowerment**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the negotiation of context and strategic redefinition of reality through language and interaction, with an emphasis on perception/interpretation and empowerment as a social practice. The purpose of this project is to highlight several linguistic strategies being used by professional facilitators<sup>1</sup> in various contexts to help people overcome fear, apathy, and self-imposed limitations. Drawing on natural language data collected through participant-observation in several (subjectively) challenging situations – from abseiling to firewalking – I use pragmatics and discourse analysis to investigate the perception of (im)possibility and people’s ‘commonsense’ beliefs about what they can or cannot do (and why) in order to illustrate how these ideas can be challenged or changed through (re)framing, metaphor, and conceptual blending. I also discuss fear in terms of social performance and demonstrate how facilitators actively deconstruct and redefine the experience of fear through negotiated meaning in interaction. Finally, by drawing on a range of research literature from various fields I attempt to situate my own observations of language use within a larger body of interdisciplinary work dealing with epistemology and issues such as perception, categorization, social knowledge claims, and the social/linguistic construction of reality.

*Empowerment* presupposes a power imbalance, which is why the language of leaders deserves special attention. Through their social role and context-based authority facilitators are often in a position to influence other people’s mental models and establish shared (short-term) expectations that subtly promote a preferred interpretation of specific activities or experiences. Various examples illustrate how participants are led to question some of their underlying assumptions about the world, engage in ‘unrealistic’ activities, and attempt the ‘impossible.’ By prompting the creation of imaginative metaphors and blended mental spaces, effective facilitators can create (imaginary) conditions or incentives that promote increased participation and trigger target behaviour through integrated action – essentially using *imaginary* realities to achieve *real* world results. Participants are never forced to do anything against their will, and although these are often superficially goal-oriented activities, the underlying purpose is to encourage people to question their self-limiting beliefs and create a meaningful experience in order to promote empowerment in everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Facilitator* refers to a unique social role, which presupposes specialized training or previous experience of a particular activity, and therefore context-specific power and social authority relative to a group of *participants*.





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## Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful to Rotary International for the initial opportunity to come to Wales on an Ambassadorial Scholarship (2005/2006) with complete freedom to determine my own research agenda and explore the questions I am passionately curious about. More specifically, I would like to thank the Kimberley Rotary Club (BC, Canada) and the Bangor Rotary club (North Wales, UK) for their ongoing encouragement and support, as well as the countless individual Rotarians I have met from around the world who have inspired me to dedicate my life to *Service Above Self* through their positive personal example.

I would not have been able to complete my research without additional financial support from the Canadian Centennial Scholarship Fund (2006) and a Commonwealth Scholarship from the government of the United Kingdom (2006-2008). Therefore, I would like to thank all the people who make these generous scholarships available, and I sincerely hope that they will continue to support Canadian scholars in the future.

My investigation into (im)possibility and the pragmatics of empowerment in the contexts I have chosen would not have been possible without the cooperation of the following people: Jon Brookes and all the staff and participants who allowed me to observe their activities at the Conway Centre; Brian and Annette Olynek at Quantum Leaps Lodge; Scott Bell at UK Firewalk; Terri Ann Laws at Mental Combat; and Dr. Alphonse Joseph (clinical hypnotherapist). Their voluntary participation in this project is sincerely appreciated.

I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Jenny Thomas, for her enthusiastic support, insightful comments/questions, and willingness to actively explore new ideas/possibilities throughout the research and writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Margaret Toye for helpful feedback on an earlier draft of each chapter, as well as Dr. Eddie Williams, Dr. Pam Macdonald, Dr. Virginia Giannelli, and others within the School of Linguistics who have helped in various ways. In addition, Dr. Magda Stroinska (McMaster University, Canada) also deserves special thanks for convincing me to finish my undergraduate degree and for giving me a good reason to pursue a PhD in the first place.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank my friends/teachers in various parts of the world for their encouragement, emotional support, and everything they have done to help keep me sane throughout this process. My sempai and training partners at Seki Ryu Zan have repeatedly helped restore the mind-body balance, and through meditation and deep conversations Laura Knott, Jacqueline Oehy, and Johannes Möller have done their best to help me *wake up*, which I sincerely appreciate. Kevin Wilkinson is a constant source of energy and inspiration, even from the other side of the planet, and the only person who knew how to help when I reached my lowest point and felt absolutely lost and shattered. Finally, thank you to Helen Joannidi for pushing all my buttons, patiently trying to make sense of my responses, and in the process teaching me more about fear, communication, and love than I ever imagined.

As always, it is the unconditional love and support of my Mom and Dad that give me the confidence to seek out new experiences, ask challenging questions, and actively explore the world. They are my springboard and my safety-net, the two people who have taught/given me more than anyone else, and I am deeply grateful and very fortunate to be their son.



CHAPTER ONE:  
**Introduction**

Argue for your limitations and  
sure enough, they're yours.  
~ Richard Bach<sup>2</sup>

Practical, effective empowerment is the underlying theme of this thesis, and my intention is to make an original and useful contribution to both descriptive and applied linguistics by highlighting the power of language to influence people's beliefs, behaviour, and perception of reality *in a positive way*. The purpose of this project is to examine empowerment as a social practice and identify several linguistic strategies being used by facilitators<sup>3</sup> to help people overcome fear, doubt, and self-imposed limitations in various contexts. Drawing on natural language data primarily collected through participant-observation, I use interactional pragmatics and discourse analysis to investigate people's 'commonsense' concepts of *possible* and *impossible*, their beliefs about what they can or cannot do in specific situations, and how these ideas can be challenged or changed through strategic language use in social interaction. Unlike other critical analyses of social power and interpersonal influence, which tend to discuss persuasion primarily in terms of 'manipulation' (see below), my focus throughout is on changes in interpretation and behaviour that are perceived as positive and believed to be in the best interests of the participants. Through the detailed analysis of specific activities involved in outdoor/experiential education, hypnotherapy, and firewalking seminars I illustrate and discuss the collaborative creation or (re)definition of context through framing, the power of conceptual blending to produce integrated action, and fear in relation to implicit collaboration and social performance. I am not only interested in how different beliefs or perspectives are expressed, but also how they are created and where our (shared) sense of reality comes from; therefore, by drawing on a range of research literature from various fields I attempt to situate my own observations of language use within a larger body of interdisciplinary work dealing with issues such as perception/categorization, epistemology, and the discursive construction of reality.

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<sup>2</sup> *Illusions* (2001: 75).

<sup>3</sup> *Facilitator* refers to a unique social role, which presupposes specialized training or previous experience of a particular activity, and therefore context-specific power and social authority relative to a group of *participants*.

Similar to other critical analysts (cf. Van Dijk 2003; Fairclough & Wodak 1997), I see no point in pretending to be an ‘objective’ observer. Since much of this research involved my own participation in the activities described, the analysis draws upon my personal experience and the thesis as a whole reflects my ongoing struggle with progressively deeper and more challenging questions. I am motivated by certain optimistic (and arguably ‘unrealistic’) beliefs, and through this research I hope to find a way to help combat social apathy by convincing people that they *can* make a difference in the world. In this introductory chapter I situate this line of inquiry within the broad field of linguistics, clarify my personal approach to pragmatics and discourse analysis, and discuss a few preliminary issues surrounding persuasion, manipulation, and mind management in relation to empowerment. This is followed by a few thoughts on the perception of (im)possibility, a comment on the linguistic construction of reality, and a brief overview of what to expect in the following chapters.

*Empowerment* presupposes a power imbalance, which is why the language of leaders deserves special attention. Although I explore a wide range of contexts, from team-building and problem-solving activities at an experiential education centre to firewalking workshops and hypnotherapy, my focus is primarily on the complex interactional work being done by professional facilitators to establish shared (short-term) expectations and subtly promote a preferred interpretation of specific experiences. Through their social role and context-based authority leaders are often in a position to *redefine reality* for other people by influencing their mental models, sometimes in ways that make new things possible for them, and that power is exercised through language and interaction. Whether it is a group of children abseiling for the first time or adults walking barefoot across red-hot coals, people are being *taught* to make sense of the world in specific ways that allow them to overcome their fears or self-imposed limitations and attempt the ‘impossible.’ Good facilitators use language to create the conditions for learning, cooperation, and personal growth. They actively deconstruct participants’ fears and expectations through discourse, negotiating a shared perspective that often redefines the purpose of an activity to enhance participants’ sense of accomplishment. Through guided reflection and group discussion, they can also lead people to interpret their personal experience in ways that justify new choices or behavioural changes in everyday life.



The activities I have observed all involve perceived risk and voluntary compliance; participants are never forced to do anything against their will, but they are led into challenging situations and explicitly encouraged to step outside their ‘comfort zone,’ face their fears, and question their commonsense assumptions. These are superficially goal-oriented activities, but their deeper purpose is to enhance cooperation, communication, and self-confidence *in other contexts*; so the leaders of these activities are not teaching rock-climbing or firewalking as a practical skill, but primarily facilitating a positive and *meaningful* experience for participants.

### **Pragmatics**

This emphasis on meaningful experience is what makes pragmatics particularly relevant, because it allows us to investigate the interpersonal creation of meaning in context. Pragmatics is a diverse field of study, and due to “overlapping areas of interest, several conflicting definitions of the scope of pragmatics have arisen” (Crystal 1995: 120). In general, it deals with the choices and consequences of language *use* in real-world contexts.

Some scholars focus specifically on the linguistic aspects of ambiguity and inference, or the distinction between sentence meaning and speaker meaning; however, my own approach is broadly interactional and based more on sociopragmatics (cf. Thomas 2006: 18) – the social aspects of pragmatics – with an emphasis on why people choose to say certain things in specific situations, and how listeners arrive at a particular interpretation. From this perspective, “pragmatics is not about meaning; it is about *making meaning*, about meaning potential, [and] showing how people negotiate meaning in interaction” (Thomas 1995: 183), which is central to practical empowerment. Pragmatics deals specifically with issues of power, interpretation, and the active negotiation of a shared perspective in a dynamic and collaborative sociocultural context. Rather than analysing grammatical structure and literal/logical semantics to understand and describe what *words* mean, pragmatics is more concerned with what *people* mean when they use language in social interaction.

The emphasis is on motivated, interactive, language use, and describing the way language can be used to bring about conceptual, contextual, and/or social change; however, *interaction* does not necessarily mean conversation or dialogue. When one



individual is introducing an activity or leading a workshop a single speaker may hold the floor for long periods of time, but this is still motivated and interactive because it is clearly for the benefit of other people (cf. Goffman 1983: 7, *platform event*; Thomas forthcoming, *addressee vs. audience*).

Although there may be pragmatic aspects to phonology, syntax, and other levels of linguistic analysis (Thomas 1995: 184), I will be working primarily with a concept of language as *discourse* – specifically, “language as a form of social practice” (Fairclough 1989: 20) – and focussing on the meaning and interpretation of relatively large chunks of talk in interaction. Since the early days of Austin (1962) pragmatics has been about how people *do things* with words, and rather than focussing on the way people talk *about* empowerment, my goal is to learn more about the way they talk *during* empowerment in order to understand the interpersonal process involved and discuss how it actually *gets done*.

### **Discourse analysis**

Similar to pragmatics, discourse analysis is widely recognized as one of the broadest yet least defined areas of linguistics, in part because it is based on scholarship from a number of very different academic disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and social psychology (Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton 2003: 1; Schiffrin 1994: 5; Fairclough 1992: 12). According to Schiffrin (1994: 20), *discourse* is often defined in two ways within linguistics: as a structural *unit* of language (larger than a single sentence), and a particular *focus* of analysis (on natural language use); however, language use cannot be analysed independently of its purpose and function in human social life, which has led to a third definition and the count noun *discourses* based on a broad range of (linguistic and non-linguistic) social practices, ideological assumptions, and power relations (Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton 2003: 1). As a result, the term ‘discourse analysis’ now encompasses everything from internal cohesion within lengthy extracts of talk or text, to intertextuality and the interdependence of language and society (Schiffrin 1994: 20, 31; Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton 2003). In Tannen’s earlier work (1989: 6) the term ‘discourse’ (or ‘language beyond the sentence’) is simply *language* – wherever it occurs, in any context and any form; however, Schiffrin (1994: 41) has deliberately adopted a slightly more specific definition of discourse as *utterances*, which are

understood to be (spoken or written) units of language use that are, unlike sentences, inherently contextualized.

According to Fairclough (1992: 12), different methods of discourse analysis can be broadly divided into ‘critical’ and ‘non-critical’ approaches on the basis of their social orientation to language use. Critical approaches tend to describe and analyse discursive practices in terms of power, ideology, and social inequality, and draw attention to the constructive effects of discourse on social identities, roles, relationships, belief systems, and cultural background knowledge. *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) is particularly useful because it deals with issues of social authority, power relations, and our ‘commonsense’ assumptions about the world (Van Dijk 2003; Fairclough 1995; 1992), which can all offer insight into the pragmatics of empowerment. According to Van Dijk (2003: 353), an “empirically adequate critical analysis ...is usually *multidisciplinary*, [and] rather than merely *describing* discourse structures, it tries to *explain* them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure” (original emphasis). From this perspective, discourse is considered a mode of *action* as well as representation; language use is seen as a powerful form of social practice that allows people to act on the world and each other in both creative and conventional ways, and as a result discourse is not only shaped or constrained by social structures but also plays a role in creating and sustaining those structures (Fairclough 1992; 1995). In addition to the formal features of talk or text, the CDA definition of discourse includes the whole process of social interaction surrounding language use, including processes of *production* and *interpretation*, and openly acknowledges the position of the analyst as a subjective and interested observer (Fairclough 1989: 24, 167; Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 2003). It is also worth noting that CDA and many other modern approaches to discourse analysis in the social sciences and humanities have been heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault 1970; 1972; Fairclough 1992: 37-61; Scollon & Scollon 2003: 542; Hall 2001); however, CDA is more explicitly grounded in the analysis of actual examples of talk or text, and intended to be a practical form of ideological critique that can challenge the control of dominant groups, resist social inequality, and empower people (through critical language awareness) to actively work towards positive social change (Van Dijk 2003; Fairclough 1995; 1992).



In general my understanding and use of the term discourse is similar to Schiffrin's definition (1994: 41), with its emphasis on inherently contextualized utterances, and essentially synonymous with 'language use' as described in the previous section on pragmatics. My approach to 'discourse analysis' is most closely aligned with interactional sociolinguistics (drawing heavily on the work of Goffman 1981; 1983) and CDA for the reasons noted above; however, I have also found certain aspects of ethnomethodology (Sacks 1995; Schegloff 2007) useful in discussing social roles and category membership. When paired with a preceding adjective (as in 'scientific discourse'), or applied to a specific domain (such as 'the discourse of fear'), I am referring both to the *ways of speaking* (or writing) characteristic of that domain, and the way certain topics are generally talked *about* – in other words, the sociocultural 'conversation' we are exposed to through mass socialization, which contributes to our general background knowledge and commonsense understanding of the world. This use of *discourse* (in the broadly social sense) is similar to what other scholars refer to as (capital D) 'Discourses,' 'orders of discourse,' or 'discourse systems' (Gee 1996: 127; Fairclough 1995: 132; Scollon & Scollon 2003: 544), which can be thought of as "socially shared habits of thought, perception, and behaviour reflected in numerous texts belonging to different genres" (Scollon & Scollon 2003: 538), or "ways of being in the world ...which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities" (Gee 1996: 127).

The content of scientific discourse may or may not be based on research that employs the scientific method, and the discourse of fear may have more to do with people's background knowledge and ideas about fear, or socially appropriate responses to fear, than what they actually say in frightening situations, (although these may be interrelated). Social discourse is one source of our shared expectations and influences our ideas of *normal*, *natural*, *possible* and *impossible*, which fundamentally affects our interpretation of situations, events, and experiences, and therefore the (social) practice of empowerment in interaction. "Most interaction and discourse is ...produced and understood in terms of mental models that combine personal and social beliefs" (Van Dijk 2006: 369), and my research is essentially about using language to challenge or change some of those (self-limiting) beliefs in social interaction.

### **Persuasion, manipulation, & empowerment**

Persuasion, manipulation, and empowerment all involve discourse, power, and influence; but they are not the same thing. In everyday use the term ‘manipulation’ has inherently negative connotations (Van Dijk 2006: 360), and the same could be said of ‘brainwashing,’ ‘indoctrination,’ or any form of ‘mind-control’ where recipients are assigned the passive role of *victims*. However, stripped of their negative associations most methods of manipulation could be considered (legitimate) forms of persuasion in certain contexts – the key difference seems to be an awareness of the speaker’s agenda, and freedom of belief and action afterward (Van Dijk 2006: 361; see also Dillard and Pfau 2002; O’Keefe 2002).

Van Dijk (2006) offers a triangulated approach to discourse, social power, and cognition, which helps highlight the similarities and differences between legitimate and illegitimate forms of persuasion. According to Van Dijk (2006: 360, 364), “manipulation not only involves power, but specifically *abuse* of power” – a discursive form of elite power reproduction used to make others do or believe things that are not in their best interests, and which may also serve to (re)produce social inequality. Van Dijk’s definition of manipulation deliberately excludes individual personality or character traits and the intention of speakers, as well as the conscious awareness/judgment of recipients that they are being ‘manipulated’; instead he restricts his analysis to social criteria and consequences, focusing specifically on individuals’ power or influence over others as a result of their social role (Van Dijk 2006: 362-364). My own analysis will also avoid looking at individual personality traits and focus more on context related roles and power relations, but unlike Van Dijk I am specifically interested in the individual level of personal interaction rather than the long-term influence of institutions and organizations.

The boundary between persuasion and manipulation is fuzzy and context-dependent (Van Dijk 2006: 361), which is why many of the social and cognitive aspects of manipulation described by Van Dijk also apply to empowerment. Facilitators *do* rely on a (legitimate) context-specific power imbalance, but they explicitly use their influence in the best interests of participants. Furthermore, there is often an emphasis on *choice* and *conscious awareness* of the beliefs that are being challenged; so rather than replacing one blind response or automatic reaction with another, the



goal is to help participants recognize their own self-limiting beliefs or patterns of behaviour, change them if they want to, and bring that awareness independently into other contexts.

Individuals differ in their susceptibility to manipulation or mind-control, and I would argue that the same thing applies to legitimate persuasion and empowerment. Changes in context, circumstances, or state of mind may make people more or less receptive to a certain message, and the argument that inspires one individual will not necessarily convince another. Various (non-linguistic) aspects of the situation, including participants' mental states, can also affect attention, participation, and the facilitator's apparent effectiveness.

Both manipulation and empowerment involve a deliberate attempt to change another person's perspective and interpretation. "If manipulators are aiming for recipients to understand a discourse as *they* see it, it is crucial that the recipients form the mental models the manipulators want them to form, thus restricting their freedom of interpretation" (Van Dijk 2006: 367); however, rather than closing down options, empowerment is fundamentally about opening up to new choices, alternatives, and interpretations. Instead of forcing participants to converge on a common understanding, good facilitators often adapt their own language (in terms of metaphor, presupposition, etc.) to fit the mental model of those they are trying to teach, and offer several ways to 'make sense' of a new and challenging experience.

### **Mind-management**

There are many forms of discourse-based mental influence, such as informing, teaching and persuasion, that also shape or change people's knowledge and opinions. ...In order to be able to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate mind control, we first need to be more explicit about how discourse can 'affect' the mind in the first place.

(Van Dijk 2006: 365)

Simply 'understanding' an utterance involves processing information about words, clauses, and propositional meaning in the short-term memory (STM). This processing is strategic, goal-directed, and hypothetical; we rely on fast, efficient guesses and shortcuts rather than complete analyses (Van Dijk 2006: 365). However, this process obviously relies on lexical meaning, 'context-models,' and other information stored in long-term memory (LTM) (cf. Van Dijk 1999a).

Although manipulating people's immediate understanding can be interesting and powerfully effective, the long-term connections between experience, interpretation, and our mental models of reality are more relevant to the pragmatics of empowerment.

Within LTM it is helpful to distinguish between the personal 'episodic' memories that define our subjective experience and life history, and more stable knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies we share due to mass socialization. Van Dijk (2006: 369) argues that the most powerful forms of (social/political) manipulation do not focus on influencing individual mental models for specific situations, but attempt to develop or exploit more general attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that are widely shared within society and therefore far more stable than the opinions or mental models of individual people. However, "influencing attitudes implies influencing whole groups, and on many occasions" (Van Dijk 2006: 369), which is why I'm more interested in the negotiation of context and creation of individual mental models. These are unique interpretations of subjective experience, including personal opinions and emotions, which draw on shared social background knowledge and become the "basis of our future memories, as well as the basis of further learning, such as the acquisition of experience-based knowledge" (Van Dijk 2006: 367).

Although we each create our own unique memories and mental models, we still expect our understanding and interpretation to fit in reasonably well with the worldview of those around us. We rely on a certain amount of shared sociocultural knowledge, gradually acquired throughout our lifetime, in order to interact in meaningful ways with other members of the same culture or social group. The stable and familiar world of everyday life is built on the bedrock of commonsense assumptions and expectations that are taken for granted and rarely questioned, yet those assumptions subtly influence both our own behaviour and the way we interpret the actions of other people (Fairclough 1989: 75). According to Van Dijk, a wide range of social groups – from pacifists and feminists to racists and male chauvinists – are based on (the perception of) shared attitudes and ideologies (Van Dijk 2006: 369; cf. Van Dijk 1999a), which may lead different groups of people to vastly different interpretations of the same situation, event, or utterance.



These deeply held beliefs are not likely to suddenly change as the result of a single experience; however, gently deconstructing an individual's belief system and challenging "aspects of the world it relates to, or indeed ...the world it presupposes" (Fairclough 1989: 78) can initiate a personal process of critical questioning with potential long-term benefits. In my analysis of empowerment across contexts I demonstrate that facilitators are effectively using discourse to influence participants' mental models, using their position of social authority to challenge participants' self-limiting beliefs, and deliberately attempting to promote the construction of episodic memories that will influence interpretation and justify new choices or positive changes in everyday life.

### **The perception of (im)possibility**

"Impossible" is relatively easy to understand and define, it's just – "Not possible" (Oxford English Dictionary, henceforth OED). That seems fairly unambiguous – there is a clear logical and semantic distinction – something is either possible or it's not. The only problem with that is the inherent ambiguity of *possible*, which refers to things a person *can* do, but also to many other things that are essentially unknown but may exist, or happen, or turn out to be true (OED: *possible*).

When a school inspector I know asked a young boy, "Can you swim?" He promptly replied, "Of course I can! I just haven't learned how yet," beautifully demonstrating an implicit awareness of the hidden potential in an open-ended interpretation of possibility. The distinction between possible and impossible is based on belief and interpretation in context – on our mental models and the worlds they presuppose – which is why influencing the *perception* of possibility is so powerful. It may not change 'objective' reality, but on an individual and social level the consequences of that shift in perspective and attitude are utterly unpredictable.<sup>4</sup>

I'm interested in the pragmatics of possibility and human potential – in using language and interaction to introduce a healthy sense of uncertainty and optimism into individuals' relatively stable worldviews, which involves exploiting the structure

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<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, whether those 'consequences' are subjectively considered positive or negative by other people depends on what you decide is possible, how you choose to pursue that goal, and the (perceived or direct) impact of your behaviour on other people's lives.

of their current belief system in order to offer new options and alternatives that ‘make sense.’ Regardless of how much we think we ‘know’ about the universe, or even the social world we’ve collectively created, there is undeniably *more* that we don’t know – and if history is any indication, we probably understand far less than we think we do. Open acknowledgement of the unknown and discussion of our inevitably partial and limited perspective as human beings can be a tremendous resource for empowerment because, to the extent that our limitations are social, psychological, or cultural rather than biological or physical, our beliefs about our own ability and potential can be deconstructed and redefined through discourse. The changes we want may not happen instantly or automatically because some skills take time to develop, but we only *practise* things we think are possible, and if we believe something is impossible we usually don’t even *try*.

### **Embodied cognition, experiential realism, & implicit categorization**

This thesis focuses primarily on interpersonal influence and social interaction rather than the patterns/process of conceptualization or features of meaning construction within the mind itself; nevertheless, there is a great deal of overlap between pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, and I have drawn upon several theoretical concepts associated with this field, including conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson [1980] 2003), mental spaces (Fauconnier 1985), and conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Although I have not engaged in a detailed cognitive analysis,<sup>5</sup> my work shares many of the same theoretical commitments, including *embodied cognition* and *experiential realism* (Evans & Green 2006; Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987), and these ideas have influenced my understanding of language, thought, and reality.

From this perspective, the human mind and body are seen as an integrated system that inevitably affects our awareness, understanding, and experience of reality. Due to the unique nature of our physical bodies, neurological organization, and sensory-perceptual systems, we have a *species-specific* view of the world (Evans & Green 2006: 44). Our minds are embodied and we have evolved to survive in a particular ecological niche; therefore, the features of external reality we perceive, the concepts

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<sup>5</sup> In the sense of using abstract diagrams to describe conceptual structure or illustrate the complex connections between specific elements across multiple layers of mental space (see Fauconnier 1985; Fauconnier & Turner 2002).



we form, and the way we talk and think about reality is largely a result of our uniquely human point of view (Evans & Green 2006: 46-48). Jackendoff (1985: 23) makes an important distinction between the *real world* as a source of raw environmental input and the *projected world* of human consciousness,<sup>6</sup> “a mental representation of reality, as construed by the human mind, mediated by our unique perceptual and conceptual systems” (Evans & Green 2006: 7). Jackendoff is not claiming that there is no real world – only that it is not the world we see and experience on a daily basis (Jackendoff 1985: 26). He argues that we cannot perceive the real world *as it is* due to unconscious processes that automatically organize and impose structure on environmental input, and since we only have conscious access to the projected world, all the information conveyed by language must actually refer to projected reality rather than directly to the real world itself (Jackendoff 1985: 29; cf. Fauconnier 1985: 15). Nevertheless, throughout this thesis I will continue to talk about interaction in ‘the real world’ in a conventional way because, according to Jackendoff (1985: 29-31), we habitually treat the projected world as *reality*, and although perception, thought, and language are inherently subjective, because we are human beings with similar bodies/mental structures our projections are generally compatible for most purposes and we can reasonably assume that we are talking about the same things, provided we are wary of potential misunderstandings.

Although cognitive neuroscientists and others may find it useful to distinguish between sense perception and any subsequent mental/cognitive processes involved in recognition, categorization, and conceptualization, for the purpose of this thesis these processes are considered automatic and effectively inseparable in ordinary social interaction.<sup>7</sup> Raw perceptual information from various sensory systems is processed in different parts of the brain and then integrated into a single coherent and well defined mental image or representation (i.e. concept) available to consciousness (Evans & Green 2006: 7), and seeing anything specific in the world around us

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<sup>6</sup> According to Jackendoff (1985: 28-29), “the projected world does *not* consist of mental images... and is much richer than the ‘percepts’ of traditional psychology: it embraces not only direct perceptual experience, with all its attendant organization, but also a wide variety of abstractions and theoretical constructs.”

<sup>7</sup> By ‘effectively inseparable’ I mean that under ordinary circumstances people generally ‘see’ the world in terms of categories and concepts. It is rare to perceive *anything* without automatically attempting to label or identify it in some way; however, this process can be brought into conscious awareness and alternative interpretations can be suggested (cf. Jackendoff 1985: 25).

typically involves categorization (Lakoff 1987: 126). According to Lakoff (1987: 5), nothing is more basic to human thought, perception, speech, and action than categorization: “Every time we see something as a *kind* of thing, for example, a tree, we are categorizing. Whenever we reason about *kinds* of things – chairs, nations, illnesses, emotions, any kind of thing at all – we are employing categories” (Lakoff 1987: 5). Whenever I discuss influencing other people’s *perception* of a situation, event, or activity, I am primarily referring to changes in (automatic/implicit) categorization, conceptualization, and selective attention.<sup>8</sup> Although this is similar to changing someone’s *interpretation* of an experience, etc., I often refer to both because interpretation may be a more intentional part of the sense-making process, which involves evaluating various alternatives and consciously choosing how to ‘see’ (i.e. understand) the situation rather than simply responding to ‘obvious’ or ‘self-evident’ features of reality. According to Jackendoff (1985: 25), the mental processes that create this (perception of) ‘natural’ structure and organization from raw environmental input are both automatic and unconscious. Although under some circumstances they are susceptible to voluntary control, at best the choice is between different organizations (i.e. interpretations), not between organized and unorganized input (Jackendoff 1985: 25).

My research does not directly address the issue of linguistic relativity; however, given the shared commitments with cognitive linguistics and overall emphasis on influencing sense-making and behaviour through language use, I would generally support a neo-Whorfian or ‘weak’ version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see Evans & Green 2006: 95-101; cf. Whorf 1956) – specifically, that changing the way we ‘cut up’ and ‘label’ the world through language has an influence on thought and action. In addition, there are many points of contact and potential overlap between (critical/cognitive) approaches to linguistic analysis that are grounded in experiential realism and certain kinds of social constructionism.

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<sup>8</sup> As opposed to modifying the actual sensory input (e.g. with a blindfold, magnifying glass, etc.).



Those who speak of our reality as socially constructed are emphasizing the part played by cultural constructs in our effective environment – our environment as we perceive it and respond to it. ...The human species – and no other – possesses the one essential tool which makes a social construction of reality possible. That tool is language. Not only is language the means by which this kind of reality construction is accomplished, it is also the means by which realities, once constructed, are preserved and transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation. Hence, it is entirely appropriate to refer more specifically to the *linguistic* construction of reality.

(Grace 1987: 3)

### **Summary & overview**

These issues are inherently interdisciplinary, and researchers working in philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education could all offer meaningful insights into empowerment from their own academic perspectives; however, I have chosen to ground my analysis in the details of discourse because, telepathy and advanced technology aside, in everyday life our access to other people's minds and our ability to influence them is primarily based on *language* and *interaction*. Language can lead people to perceive the world in different ways, and changing an individual's interpretation of a situation, event, or experience can trigger subsequent changes in both beliefs and behaviour.

Subtle changes in perspective can be powerfully transformational, revealing new possibilities and 'hidden' potential, which is why these observations of active sense-making have such broad implications (and potential applications). "Human beings are creatures of culture with an innate ability to learn, to think, and to act socially, [and] our sense of self and our sense of potential each have their origin in our social reality" (McCallister 2004: 457-458). We have the ability to reflect on our experiences, imagine alternatives, change our behaviour, and will ourselves towards the achievement of certain goals (McCallister 2004: 458); however, our interpretations of reality emerge through interaction in a dynamic yet restrictive sociocultural context. According to McCallister (2004: 453), "essentially, we become that which we believe we are capable of becoming." On the other hand, Shotter argues that "the future cannot be made to occur by the sheer force of one's conviction as to its possibility; one must relate one's actions to what at any one moment is a *real* possibility within it" (1993: 6, original emphasis), and the social

structures, cultural context, and expectations of other people cannot simply be ignored:

The institutions are there, external to him, persistent in their reality, whether he likes it or not. He cannot wish them away. They resist his attempts to change or evade them. They have a coercive power over him... The objective reality of institutions is not diminished if the individual does not understand their purpose or their mode of operation. He may experience large sectors of the social world as incomprehensible, perhaps oppressive in their opaqueness, but real nonetheless.

(Berger & Luckman 2002: 46)

McCallister claims that “will is the interface between what we want and what we achieve” (2004: 458), but according to Feldman “cultures create the conditions that allow diverse potential to be expressed as actual achievement” (1991: 211). Simply telling somebody “anything is possible” is not enough – people have to be taught to see new options from *within* their current social position and cultural worldview in order to recognize that ‘realistic’ alternatives exist and these are real possibilities *for them*.

The next chapter will focus on methodology and explain the source and diversity of my data. In each subsequent chapter I will then examine and discuss an important aspect of empowerment, with reference to examples of actual interaction between participants and facilitators engaged in various activities in three different contexts – at an experiential education centre, in a private hypnotherapy session, and during firewalking seminars for the general public. Relevant concepts, terminology, and theoretical background will be introduced at the beginning of each chapter, and later chapters will build on the previous discussion and analysis to gradually explore deeper issues.

The analysis itself begins with the concept of ‘framing’ and the creation of context in interaction, including the active negotiation of relevant social roles and categories (Ch. 3). I demonstrate how facilitators can exploit their unique social position to strategically enhance the perception of risk or safety, challenge commonsense assumptions, and establish shared expectations that influence participants’ understanding of the *real* world.



Next I focus on activities that involve ‘unrealistic’ or ‘impossible’ scenarios in order to highlight how metaphor, conceptual blending, and integrated action can produce *imaginary* realities that trigger important changes in behaviour and understanding (Ch. 4). Although the real world is never forgotten entirely, in order to participate in these activities everyone involved must (temporarily) behave *as if* certain things were true, and these collaborative imaginary worlds create the conditions and incentives for people to practise (real) teamwork and communication skills, engage in meaningful but physically impossible activities, and experiment with alternative perspectives and ways of being in the world.

I then discuss *fear* in terms of social performance, with an emphasis on impression management, implicit collaboration, and shared assumptions about reality (Ch. 5). I highlight how participants use language to express their fear, anxiety, and other invisible aspects of their subjective experience for the benefit of an audience, and demonstrate how facilitators actively deconstruct and redefine the experience of fear itself through negotiated meaning in interaction. I also show how participants can be led to interpret a powerful personal experience as ‘proof’ of deeper ‘truths’ about the nature of reality and fear in general.

Finally, I consider the big questions and broad implications of this research project as a whole and highlight a few potential applications in various (non-academic) fields (Ch. 6). I discuss some of the most inspiring and inexplicable things I have discovered through this process, and also explore deeper philosophical themes related to the nature of knowledge, experience, and the sense-making process in general. I conclude with a few more ‘crazy’ ideas that have influenced my current understanding of (im)possibility and the pragmatics of empowerment, and briefly comment on the challenge of remaining open-minded yet sceptical as I attempt to evaluate the social knowledge claims of other people and make sense of my own experience.

CHAPTER TWO:  
**Methodology & Rationale**

The mystery of life is not a problem to be solved  
but a reality to be experienced.  
~ Aart Van Der Leeuw<sup>9</sup>

**Introduction**

In this chapter I explain the source and diversity of my data, discuss the methodological challenges encountered while conducting this research, and clarify the kind of questions this thesis can and cannot address. The primary method of data collection in all cases has been participant observation and personal field notes, supplemented where possible with audio and video recording of interaction between participants and facilitators during various activities. I have chosen to examine the practice of empowerment in three distinctly different environments – at an experiential education and outdoor pursuits centre, in a private hypnotherapy practice, and during facilitated firewalking seminars for the general public. These three contexts are similar in several ways: they all rely on relatively brief but potentially transformational social encounters rather than the development of long-term educational or therapeutic relationships; effective facilitators use language to influence the subjective interpretation of experience; and instead of focussing on skill development the underlying goal is to create a positive and meaningful experience that leads to personal empowerment in everyday life. Nevertheless, there are also important differences in group dynamics and the specific challenges associated with each environment, which makes comparison across contexts interesting and worthwhile. By highlighting some of the same strategies in outdoor education, hypnotherapy, and firewalking – specifically, framing, conceptual blending, and the redefinition of fear or self-limiting beliefs – I hope to demonstrate the power of language to help people attempt/achieve the ‘impossible’ and argue that these interactive techniques can be adapted and applied to empower people in a wide range of social situations.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Original source unknown; [c.1876-1931].

<sup>10</sup> This research is not specifically about macho, male-dominated activities or the *real* risks and *serious* consequences of extreme outdoor adventures; it is about similarities in interaction and language use in outdoor education, hypnotherapy, and firewalking. The activities discussed can all be effectively facilitated and easily done by both men and women – of various ages, sizes, and backgrounds – because they occur within a relatively controlled environment and rely on perceived risk and the (guided) interpretation of experience to create a more challenging/empowering context.



I begin by describing each of the three research sites, as well as the kind of activities and interaction I observed at each location. I also discuss the technical details of data collection, including my role as a participant-observer, specific challenges encountered in each context, and various sources of supplementary information. I explain how *perceived* risk and peer-group interaction help compensate for the observer's paradox (Labov 1972: 209), and acknowledge my own motivation, subjective interpretation, and position as an *interested* rather than 'objective' observer. Finally, I address a few frequently asked questions and highlight some common misconceptions in order to clarify the scope of this research – there are some intriguing questions it was simply not designed to analyse and cannot attempt to definitively answer.

Although all reasonable steps have been taken to ensure the anonymity of participants and facilitators, the people and affiliated organizations described below have voluntarily given their informed consent to be identified in connection with this project, and this research would not have been possible without their collaboration and support. I sincerely appreciate their enthusiastic cooperation, and I hope eventually this work can contribute in some small way to the meaningful work being done by these people on a daily basis. Although I had no direct control over the size and composition of the groups I chose to observe, basic demographic details of the participants and facilitators are provided in Appendix A, along with a chart that summarizes the various research sites and data sources.

### *Experiential Education*

The *Conway Centre*<sup>11</sup> is a residential experiential education and outdoor pursuits centre located on the island of Anglesey in North Wales (UK). As far as empowerment is concerned, it's like a large-scale human laboratory where well trained facilitators lead specialized programmes for groups of all ages that deliberately push people to the edge of their personal 'comfort zone' through a wide range of challenging outdoor activities, including rock-climbing, abseiling, high and low ropes-course elements, and various imaginative problem-solving activities designed to develop teamwork and communication skills. This was my primary

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<sup>11</sup> *Canolfan Conway Centre* ~ ([www.conwaycentre.co.uk](http://www.conwaycentre.co.uk)), Llanfairpwll, Anglesey, UK – LL61 6DJ.

research venue and the interaction I observed there provided the inspiration to explore framing, imagination, conceptual blending, and social performance in other contexts.

Since my research began as an open-ended investigation into the pragmatics of empowerment, rather than starting with a particular theoretical framework I chose to simply observe the interaction between staff and participants at the Conway Centre and see what I noticed about their use of language. Through an iterative process that involved moving backwards and forwards between an interdisciplinary literature review and my own observations, I gradually began to focus my attention on specific activities and chose to concentrate on framing, blending, and social performance because they seemed particularly interesting, important, and adaptable. Later, when I started to explore parallels in other contexts, I deliberately applied this emergent framework to the interaction I observed in hypnotherapy and various firewalking workshops in order to support my argument that these powerful linguistic strategies could also be effectively applied elsewhere, (as discussed in chapter six).

In practice, outdoor education is often closely aligned with the principles of *experiential learning* (Barton 2007: 8), which is essentially *learning through doing* – “it is a process through which individuals construct knowledge, acquire skills, and enhance values from direct experience” (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 3; cf. [American] Association of Experiential Education 1995). At first glance, the term *experiential learning* appears intuitively easy to understand; however, it can refer to (or obscure) an incredibly diverse range of meanings, goals, and social practices (see Weil & McGill: 1989).<sup>12</sup> In relation to language, interaction, and the pragmatics of empowerment in the contexts I have analysed, a more specific definition of experiential learning is “the *sense-making process* of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (Beard & Wilson 2006: 2, my emphasis), which highlights the importance of interpretation. Facilitators of this process serve as “the midwives of the learning experience” (Luckner & Nadler 1997: xv), helping people develop a rich, meaningful, and

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<sup>12</sup> Although at the moment my focus is on the Conway Centre specifically, from another perspective *all* the activities discussed in this thesis, including firewalking and hypnotherapy, could be seen as forms of experiential learning.



personally inspiring story from the seeds of raw experience, which relies extensively on the interpersonal negotiation of meaning in interaction. “It is a matter of constantly co-constructing, co-creating, and editing the information so that individuals can internalize the meaning from the experience” (Luckner & Nadler 1997: xvi).

In relation to (experiential) education and human resource development, Wilson (2005: 7) defines *learning* as “a relatively permanent change of knowledge, attitude or behaviour occurring as a result of formal education or training, or as a result of informal experiences”; however, raw experience does not necessarily lead to new insight or improved understanding because we can be easily misled by our own (mis)perception or (mis)interpretation, which may merely reinforce a pre-existing bias in our personal belief system (Beard & Wilson 2006: 20). Paying attention and actively processing (or reflecting upon) an experience are now generally considered essential for learning to occur (Beard & Wilson 2006; Luckner & Nadler 1997; Greenaway 1996), although there is ongoing debate among educators, therapists, and trainers about how/when this occurs, the (practical) need for *facilitated* reflection/reviewing, and the (ethical) extent of appropriate intervention into the personal sense-making process of participants (Beard & Wilson 2006; Luckner & Nadler 1997; Wurdinger & Potter: 1999; Greenaway 1996; Weil & McGill 1989).

### **Perceived risk**

The Conway Centre has proven to be an ideal environment to study certain aspects of language and interaction because the facilitators and participants have fundamentally different perspectives on the inherent danger, difficulty, and underlying purpose of the activities they are engaged in (Airey 2000: 65-69). The difference in perception between novice participants and an expert (or experienced) facilitator is acknowledged in the literature on experiential learning and outdoor/adventure education (Rohnke 1999: 126; Bunting 1999: 130), and often exploited in order to influence participants’ interaction and interpretation of context – in many outdoor education and adventure programmes the goal is “to decrease the *real risks* while maintaining and capitalizing on the *perceived risks*” (Bunting 1999: 130). According to Barton (2007: 18), this distinction cannot be sustained under detailed scrutiny because, despite precautions, there is likely to be a residual level of *real* risk inherent

in even the most innocuous activities; however, it does make a useful distinction between activities which entail relatively serious consequences in the event of participant error, and structured activities in a relatively controlled environment, which often involve more trivial and contrived consequences. Rohnke (1999: 127) makes a similar distinction between *pure* and *programmed* adventure, and argues that the “perception of risk must remain or the experience degrades to a carnival ride, no more than a cheap thrill.”

According to one experienced facilitator, the most valuable learning takes place when participants are engaged in activities with an inherent element of (perceived) risk, and the notion of ‘challenge by choice’ is central to activities at the Conway Centre because it serves to reinforce the perception that control is retained by the group (Airey 2000: 42, 45). Participants are never *forced* to do anything against their will; however, skilful language use allows facilitators to change the way participants ‘see’ the situation and interpret their experience, helping them to recognize and often overcome their fears, insecurities, and self-imposed limitations (cf. Beard & Wilson 2006: 3, 21). Although participants may develop interest and enthusiasm for a new activity as a result of these programmes, the underlying purpose is personal empowerment rather than practical skill development. Groups come to the Conway Centre to develop trust, teamwork, and problem-solving skills through experience and interaction, to learn lessons in this specialized educational environment that can be applied in everyday life, and to go home as better communicators rather than climbers.

### **Participant observation**

My role as a participant-observer at the Conway Centre was essentially that of an additional (voluntary) staff member helping to facilitate various group activities; however, when working with smaller groups of adults I also took the opportunity to attempt several of the more individual activities (such as abseiling or the high ropes-course elements) in order to experience the fear and challenge for myself. Although I assisted with some aspects of personal safety and answered basic questions about the rules of each activity, the primary facilitator was always an employee of the Conway Centre or suitably qualified freelance outdoor education instructor and I was careful not to be directly involved in teaching or leading the group because, as far as



possible, my goal was to observe 'ordinary' interaction in this context. When meeting a group of participants for the first time I would typically introduce myself as a Canadian currently studying at the university in Bangor, explain that I am interested in learning more about the kind of work they do at the Conway Centre, and ask the group's permission to spend the day with them and join in their scheduled activities. If pressed for a more detailed explanation of my university programme (by teachers or school administrators) I said that I'm studying linguistics and I'm interested in several aspects of communication and group dynamics in scary or challenging situations.

As a result of cooperative engagement in challenging tasks and the perceived risk involved in many of these activities, it seems highly unlikely that participants intentionally altered their natural/ordinary ways of speaking and interacting in this context due to the observer's paradox. According to Labov (1972: 209), one of the most effective ways of diverting conscious attention away from speech is to involve the subject in topics/memories that arouse strong emotions, a strategy he has exploited in his own research with the "Danger of Death" question: "Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of being killed?" (Labov 1972: 93). As for my own research, although the participants are relatively safe during the activities I have observed, the *perceived* risk and potential 'danger of death' is often quite high, so rather than merely remembering/imagining the fear or anxiety associated with a dangerous situation, the participants are actually engaged in tasks that trigger the experience of those emotions and demand their full attention.

For the most part, staff members were fully engaged in their professional role as facilitators and seemed to think I was focussed on interaction between the participants, and the participants were engrossed in dynamic interaction with their normal peer group<sup>13</sup> and seemed to think I was watching the staff in order to learn how to lead the activities. As an adult wearing appropriate outdoor clothing and obviously familiar with the Conway Centre's facilities, many participants simply assumed I was just another staff member, which became apparent when they asked "how long have you worked here?" and similar questions. In any case, as a pseudo-

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<sup>13</sup> Students of approximately the same age from the same school, or adults from the same workplace.

staff member I had a legitimate role within the group, which allowed me to observe the activities and interaction from more of an insider's perspective. Although my presence may have had a subtle influence through personal interaction with participants and facilitators, because I had a peripheral yet socially ratified role in the groups I observed, my involvement did not significantly alter the ordinary patterns of behaviour and spontaneous interaction that emerged during these activities. All the staff facilitators I worked with were aware of my research agenda in a general sense, seemed genuinely interested in it, and were friendly, helpful, and extremely cooperative; however, the Conway Centre frequently allows university students in education and outdoor recreation leadership to visit on short-term work placements, so most facilitators seemed perfectly comfortable having an inexperienced observer present and did not deliberately alter their ordinary methods of facilitation for my benefit.

Initially my point of view was closely aligned with the participants because the setting, activities, and expectations in this context were unfamiliar to me, but the more I returned to watch different groups struggling over the same challenges the more I began to appreciate the facilitators' perspective. According to Airey (2000: 69), as a result of repeated long-term exposure to each activity, established competence, and a methodological or sequential approach to safety, staff members at the Conway Centre are able to focus more on personal empowerment as a potential learning outcome – unlike participants, who may be preoccupied with simply surviving!

### **Police clearance & other details of data collection**

Although I was in the presence of Conway Centre staff members at all times, for the safety of all concerned the director of outdoor education asked me to consent to a standard police background check before being allowed to observe or interact with participants, resulting in an Enhanced Disclosure from the Criminal Records Bureau. Initially I had hoped to use a small digital video camera<sup>14</sup> to capture the full context of interaction; however, the vast majority of participants were school children (aged 10-16) from various communities throughout Wales and England, which made it virtually impossible to obtain parental consent to film these groups. As a result, I

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<sup>14</sup> Sony Handycam (*HDR-HC3EK*) digital HD video camera, recording on mini DV tapes (*DVM60*).



relied primarily on discrete field notes to record my observations of language and interaction in this context. In addition to contextualized quotations, I also took note of the group size, activity sequence, and basic demographic details of the people involved.<sup>15</sup> I spoke with staff members individually prior to each day's activities, and with their informed consent I was able to obtain extracts of their verbal instructions and interaction with participants by using a small microphone clipped to my collar and attached to a mini-disc audio recorder<sup>16</sup> concealed in an inside pocket of my jacket. By pressing and releasing the pause button at the right time I was able to capture what the facilitators were saying without recording the participants. On one occasion a group of adults also gave me permission to film them during the high ropes-course and use the video for research purposes, including publication and conference presentations (Conway video, see Appendix C). Copies of the various consent forms I produced can be found in Appendix F.

### **Interaction observed in this context**

Effective facilitators at the Conway Centre use language to achieve a variety of goals in social interaction: they are able to strategically alter participants' perception of social roles, safety equipment, and the risk associated with various activities; they enhance motivation and participation through the creation of vivid imaginary scenarios; they help participants acquire new skills through integrated action based on conceptual blending; and they acknowledge people's fear as 'normal' and 'natural' while simultaneously invalidating it as an excuse for non-participation. These are the kinds of motivated language use I have analysed in order to gain insight into the pragmatics of empowerment in this context.

A more detailed description of the participants, equipment, and expectations involved in each activity is provided during the discussion and analysis of specific examples in the following chapters. For more information on the historical development of the Conway Centre, the educational theory behind outdoor/experiential education in this specific context, and a detailed description of the high ropes-course in particular see Airey (2000).

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<sup>15</sup> Demographic details included the number, gender, and approximate age of participants and staff facilitators, as well as any social roles/power relations that became apparent within the group (e.g. employer/employee, etc.).

<sup>16</sup> Sony portable Minidisc (MD) recorder (*MZ-R37*).

## *Hypnotherapy*

Building on my experience and observations at the Conway Centre, I chose to look for parallels in the language of hypnotherapy because I became interested in the power of vivid *imaginary* (mental/conceptual) realities to produce positive effects in the *real* world. Hypnosis is well established as an adjunct to many modern healing professions, including medicine, dentistry, and clinical psychology (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001), and there are numerous clinical accounts of hypnosis helping people cope with everything from stress, trauma, and intense fears or phobias, to asthma, allergies, and acute or chronic pain (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001; Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997). Behavioural applications include the treatment of obesity and smoking cessation programmes, and additional examples of an overtly physical response include reducing blood loss during surgery, enhancing blood clotting in severe haemophilia, eliminating persistent warts, and reducing the inflammation caused by severe burns (for detailed references see individual chapters by Crawford; Evans; Rose; Ewin; and Glazer; in Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001).

From a linguistic perspective, hypnotherapy is fascinating because the whole process is a specialized form of social interaction that relies almost entirely on the skilful use of language in a particular context. Essentially, in a clinical setting rather than stage performance, all the patient is required to do is relax and pay attention to the sound of another person's voice. In contrast to the physical challenges and external activity associated with outdoor education, during hypnotherapy the activity is mostly mental (and/or emotional) and the only obstacles to overcome are one's own resistance and internal barriers; however, there are also some very subtle (physical) activities associated with deep (physical) relaxation, which may be brought under more conscious control through the induction process facilitated by the therapist (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001: 6).



## **Hypnosis**

Hypnosis is a word that conjures many associations. There is a certain magic in the ability of mere words to produce profound changes in a person's mood, thoughts, and behaviours. There is a compelling quality to subjects' reports of involuntary experiences that often accompany hypnotic behaviours. And there is an almost eerie feeling of surprise and amazement when hypnotized subjects demonstrate classical hypnotic phenomena such as positive and negative hallucinations, alterations in pain sensitivity, and amnesia upon command.

(Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: xxi)

There are many different definitions and induction procedures associated with hypnosis; nevertheless, most practitioners agree about the kinds of observable phenomena characteristic of this activity or state (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001: 4; Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: 4). It can be thought of as an interactive process involving somewhat specialized procedures in a social situation where one person (designated 'the hypnotist') suggests that another person (the patient, client, or subject) experience certain changes in sensation, perception, cognition, or control over motor behaviour (Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: 4; cf. Kihlstrom 1985). Currently the most widely accepted definition of hypnosis is the one originally proposed by the British Medical Association in 1955:

Hypnosis is a temporary condition of altered perception in the subject which may be induced by another person and in which a variety of phenomena may appear spontaneously or in response to verbal or other stimuli. These phenomena include alterations in consciousness and memory, increased susceptibility to suggestion, and the production in the subject of responses and ideas unfamiliar to him in his normal state of mind. Further phenomena such as anaesthesia, paralysis and the rigidity of muscles, and vasomotor changes can be produced and removed in the hypnotic state.

(Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001: 4)

Although the term 'hypnosis' is based on *hypnos*, the Greek word for sleep (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001), brain wave studies of subjects 'under hypnosis' show an alert brain wave pattern associated with profound concentration or fixed attention, and not that of a deep sleep state (Linden 2001: 41-42). Additional research has also clearly established that hypnosis is something done *by* the subject rather than *to* the subject; hypnotized people retain the ability to control their own behaviour; and subjects are aware of their surroundings and can monitor events outside of the framework of suggestions (Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: 11). However, studies of hypnosis have also demonstrated a reduction in critical thinking

and suspension of subjects' *generalized reality orientation* – the frame of reference individuals usually rely on to interpret and give meaning to their experience (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001: 5; cf. Shor 1969). As a result, many patients readily respond to vivid imagery and fantasy, and are more willing to accept changes in perception and cognition suggested by the therapist *as reality* (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001: 5, 7). According to Linden (2001: 41), the client and clinician are partners in the process, and ultimately “all hypnosis is self-hypnosis”; however, clinicians may also exploit clients' *expectations* in order to diminish resistance or enhance engagement in the therapeutic process, and leading clients to experience their own responses as *involuntary* may actually be more effective for certain clinical applications (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001: 7).

For over a century hypnosis was defined as a ‘special state’ distinct from waking consciousness; however, there is now intense controversy and ongoing debate among professional practitioners about whether there is something uniquely powerful about ‘hypnotic’ language, or whether it is merely a specialized application of everyday language and persuasion in interaction (Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: 4). Some insist it induces an altered state of consciousness or special (often trance-like) state, while others argue that hypnotic phenomena are essentially *social* behaviours that are simply by-products of powerful suggestion (Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: 7). The ‘classic suggestion effect’ has two components, which may be assumed by the subject or implied by the hypnotist in interaction: “(a) that there must be a response to a suggestion; (b) that the response must be experienced as avolitional” or involuntary (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001: 6). In other words, some practitioners see hypnosis as the perceived effect of authoritative (and inherently contextualized) language use producing a specific socially motivated response, which can be explained in terms of focussed attention, relaxation, suggestion, belief in the hypnotist, response to charisma, imagination, role-playing, compliance, and social conformity rather than some special trance-like state (Brown 2006: 125-142). Although some of these ideas will be briefly touched upon during the analysis in comparison to other contexts, many of the most fascinating (linguistic) features of hypnosis are regrettably beyond the scope of this project. At the moment my interest is not in the process of hypnotic induction itself, but on the interaction and internal/mental activities that occur *during* a hypnotherapy session.



### **Participation as data collection**

Although I spoke to several practising hypnotherapists, in both the UK and Canada, due to doctor-patient confidentiality agreements and the very personal nature of some therapy sessions, I was unable to contact their former clients or directly observe other people being hypnotized; however, Dr. Alphonse Joseph, a certified doctor of clinical hypnotherapy (DCH),<sup>17</sup> suggested that the best way to understand the process would be to experience it for myself and videotape the entire session, which I did. The result was a three-hour video of me lying on a couch with my eyes closed (Hypno video, see Appendix D), but in the dialogue I discovered that hypnosis is much more interactive than I had previously imagined. Since videotaping each session is a regular feature of Dr. Joseph's hypnotherapy practice it seems reasonable to assume that the recording equipment and observer's paradox had a negligible effect on 'ordinary' interaction in this context. The (social) practice of hypnosis is a specialized form of verbal interaction that requires sophisticated language awareness and careful self-monitoring on the part of the therapist; nevertheless, this is 'normal' language use in this context.

### **Hypnotic induction & interaction**

Through extensive use of presupposition and more specialized verbal/interactive techniques,<sup>18</sup> the therapist uses powerful suggestions to skilfully guide the patient through an unfamiliar process (and personal experience) of deep relaxation<sup>19</sup> and vivid visualization. Although the therapist does most of the talking, his careful use of language is modified and adapted in response to close observation of subtle non-verbal cues that indicate the patient's current state of relaxation and response to suggestions (cf. Zeig 2001; Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997). Superficially, when compared to a school trip to an outdoor education centre, a private hypnotherapy session conducted in the comfortable and familiar setting of a quiet suburban home seems to be a completely different kind of social encounter; nevertheless, I quickly

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<sup>17</sup> Dr. Joseph is certified through the American Institute of Clinical Hypnotherapy, located in Irvine California.

<sup>18</sup> For example, *ratification*, which involves reflecting back detailed observations of subtle physiological changes (in heart rate, breathing, blood pressure etc.) in simple declarative sentences in order to enhance the patient's subjective impression of successfully (and perhaps inevitably) going deeper into a special trance-like state (Zeig 2001: 87). Other techniques include *anchoring* (Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: 14), as well as *pacing* and *leading* in the jargon of 'neuro-linguistic programming' or NLP (Grinder & Bandler 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Deep relaxation was once considered an essential component of hypnosis; however, inductions that emphasize physical tension and alertness have also been developed and shown to be equally effective in enhancing suggestibility (Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch 1997: 11).

recognized that similar strategies were being used to redefine the context, establish shared expectations, alleviate fears, and directly influence the interpretation of experience in order to facilitate personal change and empowerment. My purpose in analysing certain aspects of the language of hypnosis is to highlight similarities across contexts in order to argue that these techniques can be adapted and applied elsewhere; although the language of hypnosis deserves more detailed study, my current focus is specifically on the pragmatics of empowerment in interaction.

### *Firewalking*

The physical activities at the Conway Centre were clearly challenging and sometimes scary, but everyone involved understood they were (humanly) possible. The internal activities involved in hypnotherapy are essentially imaginary, so theoretically *anything* is possible. I chose to investigate firewalking because I really wanted to question my own commonsense beliefs about reality and directly challenge my personal concept of (im)possibility.

#### **Participation vs. observation**

Once again the first step was participant-observation, not only to gain an insider's perspective on the activity, but also to erase all doubt and establish that walking barefoot across red-hot coals without experiencing any pain or burning is a 'realistic' possibility for relatively ordinary people like me. On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006 I took part in a firewalking seminar with Brian and Annette Olynek, the owners of *Quantum Leaps Lodge*,<sup>20</sup> in British Columbia, Canada. My original intention was to videotape the entire seminar, and they were both extremely helpful and cooperative; however, due to my own lack of experience and limited understanding of the seminar format I found it difficult to get informed consent from the other participants beforehand and set up the equipment without causing a major disruption that would inevitably affect the interaction I was hoping to record. Ultimately I found it impossible to 'observe' and 'participate' at the same time, so I chose to focus on experiencing my first firewalk rather than analysing it and I gave the facilitators my full attention. By the end of that evening I had successfully crossed the coal-bed several times, with absolutely no pain or signs of damage to my feet, and most of the other participants seemed to be fine as well. Due to the darkness it was difficult to

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<sup>20</sup> *Quantum Leaps Lodge* ~ ([www.quantumleaps.ca](http://www.quantumleaps.ca)), 2119 Blaeberry Rd. Golden, BC, Canada.



check other people's feet for burns or blisters until the next morning, but none of the participants I spoke to reported any sense of pain or discomfort. Unfortunately, since firewalking seminars are relatively infrequent events and my time in Canada was limited, I did not have the opportunity to go back to Quantum Leaps Lodge to observe another group in this particular context; however, upon returning to the UK I was able to obtain video data of similar seminars conducted by other facilitators.

### **Video data & other supplementary material**

My initial firewalking experience and the activities that led up to it are discussed and analysed in conjunction with supplementary material from several other sources. Although I was unable to videotape the workshop I attended, Brian and Annette were able to provide a copy of a promotional video called *Firewalking: Experience the Magic*, which featured an American facilitator named Ray Napolitano and included interviews with several participants from one of his firewalking seminars (Napolitano 1993). I also contacted two additional firewalk facilitators based in the United Kingdom and they each generously offered to share previously recorded footage of their seminars and answer questions via email. Scott Bell, founder of *UK Firewalk*<sup>21</sup> and current holder of the Guinness World Record for the longest firewalking distance,<sup>22</sup> sent me a DVD and his power-point slides from a seminar held in Southern England (UK Firewalk video, see Appendix E), and Terri Ann Laws, founder of *Mental Combat*,<sup>23</sup> sent me several video clips from a firewalking workshop in Rochdale (UK) that was originally filmed for a BBC television programme (Mental Combat video). These sources show the actual seminar itself, which has allowed me to observe and analyse the way this activity is 'framed' for participants and how their fears or expectations are deliberately deconstructed by the facilitators prior to the firewalk. The websites of these three organizations (Quantum Leaps Lodge, UK Firewalk, and Mental Combat) were also used as a source of background information and linguistic data, particularly the 'Frequently Asked Questions' sections. Finally, Tolly Burkan and Tony Robbins, two prominent American firewalk facilitators, have also been included in my analysis. They are quoted in the book *Firewalk: the psychology of physical immunity* (Sternfield: 1992),

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<sup>21</sup> *UK Firewalk* ~ ([www.ukfirewalk.com](http://www.ukfirewalk.com) & [www.ukfirewalk.co.uk](http://www.ukfirewalk.co.uk)).

<sup>22</sup> On Nov. 28<sup>th</sup> 2006, Scott Bell walked 100 meters (328 feet) on a bed of coals with an average temperature of 560° Celsius – he was totally unharmed and had no signs of any burns.

<sup>23</sup> *Mental Combat* ~ ([www.mentalcombat.co.uk](http://www.mentalcombat.co.uk)), 47 Park Square East, Leeds, UK – LS1 2NL.

which also offers a historical and cross-cultural overview of firewalking, including a discussion of several different scientific studies and potential explanations for why it works.

### **Transcription conventions**

My analysis and discussion are based on direct observation of language and interaction in context; however, due to the challenges and constraints encountered during data collection (discussed above), I am drawing on a mixture of audio/video recordings, personal field notes (including quotations or close approximations), and written material available in the public domain (i.e. website content and direct quotes in other published sources). Admittedly this is not ideal, and unfortunately a great deal of potentially interesting and relevant linguistic and contextual detail has inevitably been lost in the process. However, since my focus is on the features of discourse and interaction rather than, for example, prosody or phonology,<sup>24</sup> there are still a number of important observations and insights that can be drawn from this data.

For the sake of consistency across examples from various sources, I have adopted a transcription style that closely mirrors the spelling and punctuation of standard written English and enhances readability by omitting unnecessary detail. Specialists may argue that it is artificial and misleading to impose (conventional) sentence structure on spontaneous speech in interaction, and to a certain extent I agree; however, in investigating empowerment I am primarily interested in conscious and deliberate/intentional language use and its social influence on the interpretation and subsequent actions of other people, rather than (abstract) conversational structure or the features of specific speech sounds.

When there are multiple speakers in an extract, conversational overlap and turn-taking are indicated through layout, slash marks ( // ), and line breaks; however, when the focus is on a single speaker the utterance is presented in paragraph format. Lengthy pauses are indicated through ellipsis, and observations of non-verbal interaction, prosody, and relevant contextual information are included in parentheses.

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<sup>24</sup> “Prosody is the complex set of features which together make up what we commonly perceive as ‘tone of voice.’ Intonation – or pitch – is just one component. Other features – loudness, tempo, and voice quality – also play a part” (Wichmann 2000: 1). Phonology is the study of speech sounds.



Due to natural background noise, the distance between speaker and audience in some situations, and poor audio reception on some recordings, all descriptions of intonation are merely the researcher's subjective interpretation based on observation in context. Also, please note that in some cases the speaker's hesitation, false starts, and reformulation may have been omitted from the transcript, either unintentionally (in field notes) or for the sake of readability.

In general, the transcription conventions used in this thesis have been adapted from various examples compiled by Schiffrin (1994: 431-433), and for the most part use standard English punctuation marks in an intuitively obvious way. I have deliberately modified certain (linguistic) conventions in order to make the transcript more transparent for a non-specialist audience. For example, although various methods have been devised for a more detailed transcription of the sounds associated with laughter,<sup>25</sup> this level of detail is unnecessary for the current analysis and has been replaced in the transcript with the simple notation – LAUGHTER. However, the communicative *function* of laughter as an expression of emotion, interactional strategy, or coping mechanism will be discussed in relation to specific examples in various sections. A detailed list of the transcription conventions can be found in Appendix B.

Although individual staff members at the Conway Centre and all participants (across contexts) will remain anonymous, various other people (and their websites) have been explicitly identified. Much of this material is already available in public or previously published sources, and among the people/organizations I have personally worked with, those identified by name have all given their informed consent to be identified in connection with this project and in some cases explicitly requested acknowledgement.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, @ for each individual pulse of laughter, superscript <sup>M</sup> to indicate closed lips, and <sup>H</sup> for an audible in-breath during the recovery phase, etc. (Chafe 2001).

### *Three questions I cannot answer*

Over the past three years I have had the opportunity to discuss my research with a wide range of people, in both formal presentations and casual conversations, and once I explain my research topic and methodology certain questions seem to come up almost immediately, time and time again: Is rapid and lasting long-term change really possible? Is an altered state of consciousness involved? And how does firewalking actually work? These are interesting and important questions; however, the honest answer is, *I still don't know*. In this section I briefly address these issues and explain why my research cannot provide clear and definitive answers to these questions.

#### **1. Do brief experiential education programmes lead to lasting change?**

Effective facilitators can convince people they are capable of more than they think they are and encourage them to push past their fear and really try their best, which in a safe and controlled context often allows people to accomplish things that only moments before they insisted they could not do. However, outdoor/adventure education programmes in many parts of the world have been modelled on Kurt Hahn's *Outward Bound*, which is based on a 'standard' course length of 28 days, and there is ongoing debate among professionals about whether or not short courses can provide *the same kind* of long lasting learning (see Wurdinger & Potter 1999: 87-104). During participant-observation at the Conway Centre I have seen self-doubt systematically deconstructed and watched as participants amazed themselves with their own (individual and collective) achievements in this context; however, due to the brief nature of our encounter and the vast distances travelled by different groups of participants, I have no way to confirm whether these programmes lead to lasting change and long-term empowerment in everyday life. I *believe* they have the potential to affect people's lives in positive ways, but I cannot 'prove' it and my data cannot demonstrate it because my current research focuses on isolated examples of interaction in relatively short social encounters.

The professional facilitators I have worked with have all built their careers on the belief that these challenging experiences can make a difference in people's lives. Many are motivated by their own personal experiences of empowerment, and there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that overcoming fear and insecurity in a



specialized environment such as this can inspire confidence and new choices in other contexts. Garvey (1999: 94) argues that clients walk into a one-day workshop with habitual patterns of behaviour and interaction that are often unrecognizable, even to themselves, and the new experiences and supportive environment of a short-term programme can help people understand these patterns and the problems they cause from a new perspective, which may serve as a catalyst for long-term change:

But research studies are not necessary to confirm this subjective reality that one can be changed as a result of brief experiences. Most of us can point to profound changes we have made in our lives, based on experiences that were often short in duration. These experiences may have been positive or negative but they have left a lasting mark on who we became as individuals.  
(Garvey 1999a: 95)

Although it is generally true that we all (subjectively) experience turning points that produce lasting change, we may also recognize recurrent patterns in our lives and become painfully aware of struggling to learn the same lessons over and over again (Puk 1999: 98). Puk claims that even a basic understanding of the research literature on teaching and learning would suggest that long-lasting change is difficult to achieve in *any* educational context, even with sustained exposure and interaction over time, and often techniques or strategies acquired through brief experiences in a specialized context are not applied elsewhere due to lack of follow-up supervision and support (Puk 1999: 98-101).

Assessing the relative value of various experiences is inherently subjective, and even the definition of 'one-day' programmes or what counts as 'long-term' learning is somewhat ambiguous (Puk 1999: 97). According to Garvey (1999: 90), "very little research is available that specifically focuses on the effectiveness of programs based on the time clients spend in a particular activity"; nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature that strongly supports the theory and practice of experiential learning these programmes are based upon, which suggests that the *potential* for personal empowerment exists (Beard & Wilson 2006; Luckner & Nadler 1997; Rogers & Freiberg 1994; Weil & McGill 1989). Although my personal observations of various groups at the Conway Centre were limited to a specific set of activities, which typically took place during a single day, most participants were actually engaged in a week-long residential programme and often worked with the same

facilitator over several days. Schools often send groups of students year after year, and the teachers or administrators that are in a position to observe their pupils afterward often report positive results; however, only the participants themselves are in a position to assess the true long-term impact of these experiences on their lives. The focus of my analysis is on inherently contextualized and motivated language use as social practice, and (potential) empowerment is often the speaker's primary purpose, motive, or functional goal in the interaction and utterances I have analysed – regardless of the actual changes that take place in individual participants' lives afterward.

## **2. Is an altered state of consciousness involved in hypnosis or firewalking?**

Referring to 'altered' states of consciousness presupposes an implicit consensus regarding the recognition and characteristics of 'ordinary' states of consciousness, not to mention a common understanding of 'consciousness' itself. I am not qualified to address these issues, and my observations of language use and social interaction cannot provide any indication of brainwave patterns or any other recognized empirical measure of consciousness. The most I can offer is my own subjective assessment that during *all* the activities I observed and took part in the participants and facilitators appeared to be awake (rather than asleep or unconscious) and I saw no overt/obvious indication of an 'altered' state other than deep relaxation (during hypnosis) and focussed attention (during hypnosis and firewalking).

Compared to the ordinary waking state of consciousness (subjectively) experienced by most people on a daily basis, it could be argued that daydreaming, meditation, and various stages of the sleep cycle are all 'altered' states of consciousness. Repetitious daily activities such as driving or tooth-brushing can induce a kind of 'everyday trance' and the state of focussed attention associated with hypnosis has been compared to prayer or reading an engaging novel (Linden 2001: 42). The sense of *dissociation* experienced/reported by some hypnotherapy patients is similar to a state of shock triggered by severe trauma (Linden 2001: 42) and, although facilitators avoid pushing people to the point of panic, due to perceived risk the issue of suggestibility in an altered state of consciousness may also be applicable to firewalking workshops and certain activities at the Conway Centre. Nevertheless, as intriguing as these issues are, my research cannot offer any additional insight into the



deeper underlying questions of cognition and consciousness. Interested readers may wish to consult Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom (2001), or Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch (1997) for a more thorough exploration of these issues.

### **3. How does firewalking actually work?**

This is by far the most common research-related question I get asked; unfortunately, I cannot offer a clear and comprehensive answer – the truth is, *I still don't know*. Nevertheless, people demand an answer. This activity captures the imagination and raises such deeply unsettling questions about reality that many people seem to think they need an answer before than can even believe that such a thing is possible. As a result of my research I can now provide several detailed and compelling explanations for why it works; the trouble is, I cannot verify any of them. My focus is on discourse, interaction, and empowerment – not (meta)physics, psychology, or biology – and the data I have collected simply demonstrate effective persuasion through *social knowledge claims* (cf. Ristimaki 2006; Duran 1994).

Effective facilitators strategically provide participants with several alternative explanations for what makes firewalking possible, which allows people with diverse backgrounds and belief systems to participate in the same workshop without the need to converge on a common understanding of why it works – participants are free to make sense of the activity and experience in whatever way they feel most comfortable with. This may also reflect a particular approach to experiential learning in general, namely that all learning experiences are unique and personal; therefore, rather than imposing ‘pre-packaged’ ideas or interpretations, some facilitators feel they should allow people to develop their own theories based on their own actions and personal experience (Beard & Wilson 2006: 21, 55; cf. Loynes 2000).

“As a rite of purification, healing, initiation, and devotion, it has long been a thread in the cultural tapestry of countries worldwide” (Sternfield 1992: 65), and in contexts where firewalking is associated with religious ritual participants often rely on extensive preparation (including prayer, meditation, and abstinence from food, drink, or sexual intercourse for a certain period of time) and faith in a higher power for protection from the fire (Sternfield 1992).

Another option is belief in the aura or human energy field and various concepts of mind-over-matter, which allow people to consciously increase their physical immunity to fire through focussed intention but without divine intervention. This would also include explanations that rely on ‘neuro-linguistic programming’ (NLP),<sup>26</sup> self-hypnosis, or any other trance-like state. So-called ‘scientific’ explanations include: the Leidenfrost effect, a vapour barrier caused by the evaporation of (potentially fear-induced) sweat on the feet; or the relatively low heat capacity and poor conductivity of wood embers (see Sternfield 1992: 98-125; Shermer 1999: 52). There are medical doctors, physicists, and psychologists on both sides of the debate, and although I have read many accounts of other people’s firewalking experiences and ‘scientific’ experiments, my own research cannot directly address the question of *what* makes it possible, *how* it works, or *why* we are able to safely engage in this activity. Essentially, all I can do is recycle another person’s social knowledge claim and adapt one of the accounts I have heard to suit a new audience, but is one person’s *faith* in physics any more credible than another’s *faith* in God?

So varied are the firewalk preparations and so varied the attentions of individual firewalkers that the common thread of this phenomenon must be profoundly simple. Either we can all firewalk – or most of us can and always could – or firewalking is simply an act of faith...

Obviously, you don’t need NLP; you don’t need to be in a trance, self-induced or otherwise; you don’t need swords, sticks, or pinches of salt. Over and over, incredibly, the common denominator seems to be... faith! Yet it seems very likely that few in the scientific community would agree with this conclusion.

(Sternfield 1992: 61; 96)

Based on personal experience I have no doubt that firewalking is possible, and due to the nature of my current social role and research topic I have the power to make seemingly credible knowledge claims in this area; however, I feel compelled to acknowledge that convincing discursive explanations are not the same as ‘scientific

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Neuro-linguistic programming’ (NLP) was initially developed by John Grinder and Richard Bandler in the 1970’s as an alternative approach to counselling/psychotherapy. Despite the name, NLP is not a ‘branch’ of linguistics (or any other academic discipline), and although there is a strong emphasis on communication, subjective experience, and empowerment, my own research is not based on NLP in any way. However, it often comes up in relation to firewalking and hypnosis, and some of the facilitators I have studied also practise/teach NLP. (For more on NLP see Grinder & Bandler 1981; Bandler & Grinder 1982/1990; O’Connor & McDermott 1996).



proof.’<sup>27</sup> As far as interaction and empowerment are concerned, *why* it actually works is irrelevant. Participants in a firewalking workshop have no evidence that any of these explanations are *true* – actual scientific studies and world-record attempts aside, in most cases there is no thermometer to confirm the exact temperature of the embers or evaluate claims about the conductivity of burning coals, and no way to verify divine intervention, mind over matter, or the effects of NLP (aside from actually stepping into the fire, of course) – however, if these explanations make enough sense to convince people to take the first step then they are functionally effective in social interaction.

According to Scott Bell and many other facilitators, that’s ‘the secret’ of firewalking: if you can take the first step then you can walk on fire – all you have to do is keep walking – if you *can’t* take the first step, then by default you can’t walk on fire. Since most people tend to trust their own (subjective) experience as an accurate representation of reality, the act of successfully crossing the coal-bed is typically interpreted as ‘proof’ of whatever explanation they choose to believe in. Although their understanding may be modified in light of new information or alternative interpretations, very few people have the means or incentive to question their initial perception and implicit assumptions about why it works, especially during the seminar itself, because they have come into this context by choice and they *want* it to work – they expect to find an explanation they can believe in because *they want to walk on fire*.

In discussing this research with other people, I was surprised to discover that even the instructors at the Conway Centre, who regularly empower people to overcome fear and attempt intimidating activities, can still be held back by self-limiting belief systems: One facilitator actually said, “firewalking?! Oh no, I could *never* do that!” and another declared, “I’m the kind of person that *needs* a scientific explanation before I can do something like that.” I find these kinds of comments extremely interesting, and my first question is always *why?*

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<sup>27</sup> By ‘scientific proof’ what I actually mean is credible empirical research based on the scientific method (as defined by current best practice in a particular discipline, such as physics, biology, psychology, etc.), which produces results that either confirm or contradict a particular hypothesis. As Seth Lloyd explains, “scientific results can’t be proved. They can only be tested again and again until only a fool would refuse to believe them” (Brockman 2005: 57).

Explanations, whether scientific or otherwise, are part of a discursive interpersonal process that affects the *interpretation* of reality – our beliefs about reality – but presumably not (physical) reality itself.<sup>28</sup>

These claims affect the way people *make sense* of an experience, but can they fundamentally change what people are (physically) capable of doing? The focus of my research is on the interpersonal language use that facilitates the transition from a commonsense belief in the impossibility of an activity towards a more empowering perception of possibility and *willingness to try*. Few abilities are acquired instantly or without effort – even everyday achievements like walking take time to develop – but we only *practise* things we believe are possible, and a subtle shift in perspective can make the subjective ‘struggle’ to learn a more positive and pleasant experience. For those who feel they *need* to know why firewalking works, I can recommend Sternfield (1992) or Shermer (1999) as interesting places to start.

#### DISCLAIMER

I am not a qualified outdoor education instructor, hypnotherapist, or firewalk facilitator. Many of the activities described in this thesis are potentially hazardous and can result in serious personal injury – please be aware that many important details of the context, instructions, and essential safety equipment have been omitted from the analysis and discussion of these activities. If you are interested in experiencing any of these activities I recommend that you contact an organization that specializes in these services and employs suitably qualified professional facilitators. If you choose to independently experiment with any of the ideas presented in this thesis you do so at your own risk.

#### **Summary**

“There is a growing consensus that experience forms the basis of all learning” (Rogers 1996: 107), and although the terms experiential education and outdoor/adventure education are sometimes used interchangeably, experiential education is a *process* and adventure-based learning is just *one form* of experiential learning (Wurdinger 1995: 2; Greenaway 1996: 3). Although the Conway Centre activities are the most obvious example, I would argue that experiential learning is the basis for empowerment across all three contexts.

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<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, this is an assumption on my part, which reflects the dominant social discourse I was raised with and is, essentially, just another belief about reality. Quantum physicists, practitioners in various fields of ‘alternative’ medicine, and the followers of various spiritual traditions might strongly disagree.



According to the American philosopher John Dewey (1910), *Experience + Reflection = Learning*, and this applies not only to facilitated activities in a specialized setting, but to relatively ordinary experiences, social encounters, and interaction in daily life as well. Greenaway (1996) points out that often the experiences that have the most impact on people's lives are not necessarily the most 'adventurous-looking' and refers to 'important but ordinary' experiences such as:

having something to talk about, achieving personal ambitions, feeling accepted by others, gaining self-confidence, getting on with others, trying something new, breaking boundaries, getting organized, being listened to, taking action, taking risks, having fun, being liked, being helped, helping others, making friends, meeting new people, having responsibility, doing things for others, doing things with others, discovering new abilities, trusting and being trusted, being recognized for achievements.

(Greenaway 1996: 18)

Life itself can be seen as a series of *potential* learning opportunities; however, these are not necessarily enjoyable or equally beneficial – painful experiences can teach powerful lessons, which are often useful in the immediate context but may turn out to be maladaptive over time (Beard & Wilson 2006: 25; Luckner & Nadler 1997: 36). According to Luckner & Nadler (1997: 23-28), a healthy sense of anxiety, uncertainty, and cognitive dissonance can be a major catalyst for personal change – fear, frustration, and discomfort motivate people to experiment with new behaviours, emotions, or interpretations in order to regain a sense of stability and security – however, pushing people to the point of panic is generally counterproductive. Despite the apparent diversity across contexts, the facilitators I observed all effectively *use language* to enhance or exploit contextual ambiguity and participants' subjective sense of anxiety or uncertainty in order to introduce alternative (and potentially empowering) interpretations of experience in social interaction.

We all have our own unique theoretical model of the universe (or worldview), which serves as the underlying foundation for our personal sense-making process and functions as a relatively stable yet flexible interpretive framework for our interaction with the social and natural world. A consistent and coherent worldview allows us to put *everything* we know into context,<sup>29</sup> and determines whether we accept or reject new ideas and interpretations of experience by filtering raw input (from our senses or

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<sup>29</sup> This includes vast areas of acknowledged ignorance (i.e. everything we know we *don't* know).

the social knowledge claims of others) into categories that ‘make sense’ (Ristimaki 2006: 91). However, Boud and Walker (1993: 79) have identified a number of related factors that may negatively affect learning, and at least four of these are particularly relevant to the pragmatics of empowerment:

- Presuppositions about what is and is not possible for us to do;
- Threats to one’s self concept, worldview, and habitual ways of behaving;
- Being out of touch with one’s own assumptions about what one is able to do;
- Lack of confidence or self-esteem, fear, and other ‘obstructive feelings.’

(Beard & Wilson 2006: 28; cf. Boud & Walker 1993: 79)

When an experience is significantly different from our expectations we may be forced to revise our mental models to accommodate new information or simply reject the experience as atypical, incorrect, or somehow exceptional (Beard & Wilson 2006: 23), and questioning one’s assumptions about reality can be deeply unsettling. In addition, through selective attention we (implicitly or intentionally) choose to focus on (subjectively) significant or important aspects of experience and simultaneously ignore other elements we consider irrelevant (Beard & Wilson 2006: 21), which affects our interpretation and any subsequent cognitive, emotional, or behavioural responses. As a researcher I am not immune to these influences.

Through my own personal experience as both a participant and facilitator of various outdoor/experiential education programmes in the past, I have come to believe that an empowering interpretation of a particular event, encounter, or experience can lead to transformational change in an individual’s life. I am motivated by certain optimistic (and arguably ‘unrealistic’) pre-existing beliefs about language, experience, and human potential; therefore, similar to other ‘critical’ analysts, I cannot pretend to be an ‘objective’ observer when I am in fact an *interested* observer intentionally seeking new opportunities for positive social change (cf. Van Dijk 2003; Fairclough & Wodak 1997). Furthermore, my research agenda is inevitably socio-politically situated, which is indirectly reflected in financial support from various sources (including Rotary International and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office), and this has inevitably influenced my personal research priorities and objectives.



Although focussed on small-scale interaction and individual empowerment, the underlying goal of this research is to find a way to combat social apathy and help convince people to become more engaged in actively working towards a better world. The next chapter deals with the concept of 'framing' and the negotiation of context in social interaction. Through effective framing facilitators use language to highlight certain aspects of experience in order to lead participants' attention in certain directions, subtly influence the sense-making process, and thereby change the way they 'see' the world.

CHAPTER THREE:  
**Framing & the Creation of Context**

The difficult we do immediately.  
The impossible takes a little longer.  
~ *US military motto, WWII*<sup>30</sup>

This chapter focuses on the concept of ‘framing’ in interaction, and explores the creation and negotiation of context through discourse. First I introduce the theoretical background this chapter is based upon, before drawing on examples from my data to illustrate the way different yet overlapping interpretive frames presuppose or trigger different perspectives, social roles, and power relations. I conclude with a discussion of strategic frame-shifting and the importance of framing for effective facilitation and empowerment.

*Theoretical Background*

The analysis that follows relies on various concepts and principles developed by a long line of scholars interested in language and interaction, and this section reviews the most relevant aspects of previous work in several related areas. I begin by presenting a distinctly pragmatic understanding of *context* as a dynamic and collaborative definition of a situation/speech event that goes beyond mere setting. I then discuss social roles, discourse roles, and power/authority in relation to different interpretations of context. Finally, I explain my use of the term ‘framing’ and how it relates to the negotiation of competing ‘context-models’ in interaction.

**Context**

Context is basically the situation or environment where the action occurs, but it can be defined along several different dimensions: we can refer to the linguistic context of talk or text, (i.e. surrounding words and discourse); the immediate (physical) context, setting, or location; the social, cultural, or institutional context; the political and historical context; etc. These abstract nouns describe broad, overlapping orientations toward a specific (speech) event, highlight salient features of the overall setting, and often (implicitly) cast participants into certain roles. Each of these

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<sup>30</sup> Although often said to be the motto of various branches of the US Armed Forces, particularly the Army Corps of Engineers and the Navy “Seabees” (i.e. CB’s = Construction Battalion) during WWII, a similar phrase (in French) is attributed to Charles Alexandre de Callone (1743-1802), minister of finance for Louis XVI: *si c’est possible, c’est fait; impossible? – cela se fera.*



context labels reflects a particular perspective on 'reality' and defines the situation in terms of a narrow and specialized worldview in which some information is more relevant than the rest.

“Within sociolinguistics the most fully-developed and best known framework for describing context is the one proposed by Hymes (1962)” (Thomas 1995: 189), and early work in pragmatics was also based on a relatively *static* interpretation of context. Hymes' (1962) SPEAKING mnemonic<sup>31</sup> offers “a comprehensive checklist for the description of what he terms *speech events*” (Thomas 1995: 188), which captures some of the complexity of context; however, it doesn't seem to acknowledge individual participants' ability to (strategically) redefine the situation, participants, goals, or genre through discourse in order to negotiate a shared perspective and achieve various interpersonal goals. More recent research (see Akman & Bazzanella 2003; McHoul 2008) has led to an increased appreciation of people's ability to actively redefine context in interaction and “use language in order to change the situation they find themselves in” (Thomas 1995: 189).

Our interpretation of context fundamentally affects the way we behave in certain situations, including what we say and how we say it, and we generally expect other people to interpret our actions, identities, and social roles based on shared social norms. Furthermore, we are not just agents in the natural and social worlds we inhabit, we are *reflexive* agents – we monitor our own actions and orient them to the behaviour of others (Calhoun et al, 2002: 223). There are conventional ways of indicating (polite) inattention or disinterest when in the presence of other people, and although we may (pretend to) be 'by ourselves' there are often subtle signs of social awareness and performance (see Goffman 1981 on 'response cries' etc.). Even so-called 'private' or 'individual' activities are defined and performed in ways which reflect our social relationships and participation in a shared social life: When we can be alone and what we can do alone are socially determined, and we can be held accountable by other people for inappropriate behaviour and activities, even if performed alone (Francis & Hester 2004: 1-2; Goffman 1983: 2).

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<sup>31</sup> Situation; Participants; Ends (i.e. goals); Act sequences; Key; Instrumentalities; Norms; Genre (Hymes 1962).

Our interpretation of utterances, experiences, and the behaviour of other people relies extensively on contextual background knowledge about people, places, events, relationships, etc., which is woven together into (mental) 'context-models' based on various 'structures of expectation' (cf. Van Dijk 1999a; Tannen & Wallat 1987: 347).

Understanding is not merely associating meanings to words, sentences or discourses, but constructing mental models in episodic memory. ...Mental models not only define our understanding of talk and text itself (by representing what a discourse is about), but also the understanding of the whole communicative event.

(Van Dijk 2006: 367)

According to Van Dijk, in social interaction individuals' context-models not only affect interpretation, but also "operate as their – dynamically changing – plans for speaking" (Van Dijk 2006: 367; cf. Van Dijk 1999a). However, others would argue that "rather than speaking 'out of' an inner plan (or mental representation), we speak 'into' a context not of our own making, that is, not under our immediate control" (Shotter 1993: 4). Nevertheless, both describe interaction in terms of spontaneous adaptation to changing circumstances and a mutually constructed context.

We can choose to say whatever we want and use discourse to challenge dominant ideologies and power relations or try to change the situation we're in, but in order to make any sense at all we must acknowledge some features of a shared reality and attempt to understand the perspective of other people. "We simply cannot act in any meaningful way without drawing upon collective interpretive schemes" (Calhoun et al, 2002: 223), which are standardized elements of our sociocultural background knowledge that allow us to sustain an accountable universe of meaning during social interaction (Giddens 2002: 241).

"One's social competence consists in the ability to use these structures in producing and making sense of social interaction" (Francis & Hester 2004: 4-5), which includes pragmatic competence, and relates to Shotter's concept of 'knowledge of the third kind' – not a "decontextualized knowing 'that,' or knowing 'how,' but a knowing from 'within' a situation or circumstance" (Shotter 1993: xiii). This is an understanding of context that goes beyond knowing *what* to say or *how* to behave in a certain situation to knowing *why* and understanding *what it means* to those



involved. Rather than theoretical knowledge or even practical knowledge, this is the participatory knowledge we acquire as members of a particular society or culture; “knowledge that grows with our participation in the acts of living” (Rom Harre, in Shotter 1993: viii).

Pointing once again to the important link between interaction and context, Hymes (1972: 63) has argued that any concept of linguistic ‘competence’ that takes actual language *use* into account should include not only knowledge or intuition about “whether and to what degree something is formally [i.e. grammatically] possible,” but also whether it’s *feasible, appropriate, and actually done*.

Taken out of context, even ordinary behaviour and discourse can suddenly become puzzling, ambiguous, or nonsensical; however, “in ordinary social life, in actual contexts of interaction, persons are not given licence to systematically doubt the meaning of words and actions” (Francis & Hester 2004: 5). Social background knowledge and ‘commonsense’ assumptions allow individuals to quickly identify the most likely interpretation(s) based on the current situation or circumstances, and any adequate account of mutual understanding must acknowledge the influence of context on the comprehension of meaning in interaction (Francis & Hester 2004: 5).

In the production of meaning in interaction, context cannot be treated as merely the ‘environment’ or ‘background’ of the use of language. *The context of interaction is in some degree shaped and organized as an integral part of that interaction as a communicative encounter.*

(Giddens 2002: 242, original emphasis)

Language in interaction is both context dependent and context *defining*. Individuals are multifaceted social actors who can embody a variety of identities and social roles, and language is more than a set of labels for different referents that reflect the (objective, static, pre-existing) social hierarchy and power relations; it can be used to manipulate those relationships and strategically (re)define (or co-construct) the context in ways that affect interaction and group dynamics (cf. Duranti 1972). Subtle features of discourse can activate or impose an interpretive frame that forces other participants to respond from a particular role or subject-position (Fairclough 1989: 38), which may entail specific rights or obligations.

### Social roles & discourse roles

The relevance of certain social roles is often linked to a particular interpretation of context, and since these roles are associated with various assumptions/expectations and social power-relations, they can have an enormous influence on interaction and (potential) empowerment. “It is important not to confuse the concept of *social* role (e.g. teacher, parent, friend, child, waiter), with *discourse* role (speaker, hearer, addressee, etc.), although ...there are times when the two are closely related” (Thomas forthcoming). Social roles refer to relationships between different (groups of) people and reflect various institutional, occupational, and otherwise salient social categories, whereas discourse roles describe the relationship between an individual and a specific message. Most models of communication make a basic distinction between two obvious and fundamental discourse roles – speaker and hearer, or the producer of a message and a potential recipient (cf. Goffman 1981; Thomas forthcoming); however, this is overly simplistic because there are different *kinds* of producer and recipient roles, which are referred to in natural language and responded to in interaction.

Goffman (1981) splits the role of ‘speaker’ into author, animator, and principal in order to distinguish between the creative source of the message (author), the active expression or delivery of the message (by an animator), and the beliefs, ideas, and attitudes reflected in the message (i.e. the position held by the principal).<sup>32</sup> The term ‘speaker’ typically embodies all three roles simultaneously (and it will be used in that sense throughout the analysis), although in some contexts this is clearly not the case and under certain circumstances people may “openly speak *for* someone else and *in* someone else's words” (Goffman 1981: 145). Speakers can indicate the intended recipient(s) of an utterance through their gaze, body orientation, and the volume of their voice, or select a specific addressee (either explicitly by name or implicitly in the content of the utterance), and there is often a fluid and dynamic alternation between speaker and recipient roles in face-to-face social encounters; however, different recipient roles can be distinguished in terms of their (ratified) participation in the exchange or encounter and relative right of reply.

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<sup>32</sup> Although Goffman also introduces the terms *figure* and *strategist* in his earlier work (1974), these are not directly relevant to the interaction I have observed and analysed because, for the most part, participants are (assumed to be) speaking *for themselves* and performing *their own* social identities.



Blending Goffman's earlier insights with commonsense categories that most people intuitively recognize in interaction, Thomas (forthcoming) has identified at least four prototypical producer roles – speaker, spokesperson, reporter, and mouthpiece, (plus the non-speaking role of author) – which reflect differing degrees of responsibility for the message being transmitted. She also identifies several additional receiver roles – including addressee, auditor (or audience), bystander, and eavesdropper/overhearer – which each entail a different degree of participation and 'right of response' (Thomas forthcoming; cf. Goffman 1981). People rapidly change roles depending on the content or context of interaction, and more than one person can occupy each position. Not all categories will be relevant in every interaction, and this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. "In naturally-occurring discourse not all discourse roles are of equal importance and ...some roles (notably those of speaker and addressee) have privileged status because of their psychological salience" (Thomas forthcoming).

These are dynamic categories that producers and recipients can rapidly shift between during interaction and often renegotiate in order to pursue specific social goals. Although discourse and social roles are often implicitly understood, they can be explicitly activated or deactivated and strategically claimed or contested through language use. In addition, each role is associated with certain rights and obligations, which directly affect interpretation and interaction, for example:

You will interpret a speech act differently if you know that the utterer is relaying a message at the behest of a higher authority, rather than speaking on his/her own behalf, [and] conventionally, overhearers have no 'right of reply' so a speaker may obtain considerable advantage by casting the real target of a speech act in the role of 'overhearer' rather than that of 'addressee.'

(Thomas forthcoming)

### **Role-switching**

In the same way that we can shift from speaking for ourselves to speaking on behalf of somebody else, or set aside our personal opinion and evaluation in order to report on an event more 'objectively' by switching *discourse* roles; we can also shift from speaking *as a* parent to speaking *as* head of school or police chief or any other *social*

role we choose to claim.<sup>33</sup> In the right context that role may be obvious and implicit – since uniforms and other specialized accessories often allow us to identify many (stereotypical) social roles – otherwise a specific role may need to be explicitly ‘activated’ (or ‘deactivated’) in discourse.

Social roles and discourse roles are different, but often related, because unless a particular role is explicitly activated (or deactivated) we may assign a context-related ‘default’ role in interaction and base our interpretation on that assumption. For example, when a police officer tells you to move your car or a nurse asks you to remove your trousers, we typically assume they are speaking in their respective social roles, which each entail a certain amount of social authority within a specific domain – but this interpretation (and voluntary compliance) relies crucially on context and social background knowledge. In traditional speech act theory certain (felicity) conditions also need to be satisfied in order for an act to be successfully accomplished (Austin 1962) – basically, you need the right speaker to say the right thing in the right situation.<sup>34</sup> However, this model presupposes that competent language users will *recognize* and *agree upon* the ‘right’ speaker, utterance, and situation, which involves identifying the relevant social roles, determining speakers’ discourse roles, understanding the language, structure, and pragmatic (or illocutionary) force of the utterance itself, and converging on a common interpretation of context.

Goffman’s *participation framework* essentially refers to the conventional discourse roles associated with certain identities, activities or contexts and the *array of possibilities* that guide an individual’s expression and interpretation of talk in interaction at any particular moment (Goffman 1981: 137). He also points out that when we investigate language use in social interaction we are not dealing with communication between mere bodies or minds, but between people with particular

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<sup>33</sup> Although you can *claim* any role you like, others may actively dispute the legitimacy of that claim on the basis of relevant social criteria such as (real or perceived) educational qualifications, genetic/biological relationships, and professional, marital, or citizenship status, etc. In many cases the meaning/relevance of these criteria is negotiable.

<sup>34</sup> In some cases the participants must also have the right thoughts, feelings, or intentions and must actually follow through on those intentions (i.e. behave properly afterward); however, these are secondary conditions. If the person, context, or utterance is inappropriate the act is *not* accomplished. If the thoughts, feelings, or intentions are inappropriate the speech act *is* accomplished, but poorly, insincerely, etc. (cf. Austin 1962 – ‘misfire’ vs. ‘abuse’).



roles, relationships, and identities – members of a particular group, office, association, category, or some other socially based source of self-identification (Goffman 1981: 145). Although subject to active negotiation and transformation, participation frameworks associated with particular domains can become somewhat ritualized over time, allowing people to self-consciously transplant familiar routines and ‘natural’ roles or power-relations from one social situation into a different interactional environment (Goffman 1981: 153). This is relevant to my analysis of experiential education, where school-based roles and power-relations are often imported into the context of outdoor adventure activities and projected onto staff facilitators.

Role-switching isn’t random – people have reasons for activating specific roles and challenging the claims of others in interaction, which makes it motivated, goal-oriented behaviour. Although we can discuss all these aspects of interpretation and understanding in isolation, they are actually inseparable and highly negotiable in interaction. Role-switching may not change the situation or event entirely, but asserting the relevance of a particular identity or power-relationship can affect the way people respond to each other and interpret their experience.

#### THE FACILITATOR ROLE

In most of the social encounters I have analysed there is a clearly defined *facilitator* role, which presupposes specialized training or previous experience of a particular activity, and therefore context-specific power and social authority relative to a group of *participants*. According to Torres (2001: 11), the focus of skilled facilitators is on managing the learning environment in order to create situations that allow others to (re)discover their own truths, abilities, and hidden potential – supporting awareness and personal insights, guiding participants toward their desired outcome, and creating the impression they did it themselves (Torres 2001: 11). However, this approach presupposes that the facilitator *understands* and (implicitly) *approves of* participants’ personal goals, while simultaneously implying that participants do *not*, in fact, achieve those goals independently but as a direct result of facilitator intervention.

Choosing the appropriate titles or category labels for these social roles can be problematic because they may implicitly reflect different values or discourses. For example, some scholars suggest that the term ‘facilitator’ is burdened with the conceptual baggage of humanistic psychology and reflects particularly individualistic concerns (Boud & Miller 1997: 7). Alternative labels for a similar role include *trainer*, *instructor*, and the French term *animateur*, which all refer to the individual ‘in charge’ of a specific group of people and highlight a certain kind of relationship. In the social encounters I have analysed, the person ‘in charge’ of an activity is not necessarily ‘leading’ it or actively participating, but guiding others towards a particular (interpretation of) experience.

As a result of ongoing research in education and cognitive psychology there has been a gradual shift away from the traditional ‘transmission’ model of teaching towards developing more active and autonomous learners capable of defining and pursuing their own personal educational goals in a variety of contexts (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 12-13).

This shift in perspective about the teaching/learning process requires educators to *change how they define their role* [and] means spending less time trying to be the “sage on the stage” and more time as the “guide on the side” – designing, supporting, and managing the learning environment and teaching process.

(Luckner & Nadler 1997: 13, my emphasis)

According to Garvey (1999b: 145), “in the real world of outdoor education, leaders are more often functioning as sociologists, managing the group, rather than psychologists, counselling each individual in the group” and in some contexts a practitioner’s preference for one term over another may reflect subtle differences in (social) discourse and (perceived) roles, goals, expertise, or power-relations (see Beard & Wilson 2006: 47-50). I have chosen to use the terms *participant* and *facilitator* because I believe this is the most useful and intuitively obvious way to refer to these salient role-based categories across contexts; however, other social roles may become relevant in interaction, particularly when participants know each other through shared social networks that extend beyond the immediate context.



### Membership categorization

Membership categorization, based largely on the work of Harvey Sacks ([1964-1972], 1995), offers one explanation for how we identify relevant social roles and relationships in everyday interaction. The main idea is that we regularly experience and understand the (social) world in terms of shared (commonsense) categories that are organized and related in systematic ways. We recognize different *kinds* of people – men, women, Catholics, Canadians, vegetarians, alcoholics, infants, surfers, serial-killers, jugglers, judges, draft-dodgers, hockey-fans, homeless people, etc. – and the labels we assign affect our interpretation and expectations. Some categories seem static (e.g. male) or ‘objective’ (e.g. 28 year-old), while others are more spontaneous and based on subjective (or stereotypical) social criteria; however, since *everyone* belongs to more than one category<sup>35</sup> and they are not all equally relevant in every situation, a choice must be made – out of all the available options, which are (the most) relevant *here* and *now*? Work that focuses on membership categorization deals with how we make this choice and the social knowledge or worldview it reflects. Sacks describes this process in terms of ‘membership categorization devices’ (MCD), which can be thought of as distinct sets of resources and practices – one or more collection(s) of categories and some rules of application (Schegloff 2007: 467; Sacks 1995). (For a clear and accessible ‘tutorial on membership categorization’ see Schegloff 2007).

Since my research into the pragmatics of empowerment deals with the negotiation of context, roles, and ‘commonsense’ reality, membership categorization provides a useful way of discussing people’s tendency to base their ideas of possible/impossible and arguments about what can or cannot be done on the *kinds* of people involved. Abseiling down a cliff or walking barefoot across red-hot coals is clearly possible for *some* people, but is it possible for *everyone*? The perception of possibility is often tied to category membership – some will say, “if she can do it; I can do it!” (implicitly putting themselves in the same category); while others who witness an extraordinary accomplishment will highlight *differences* in category membership to

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<sup>35</sup> According to Schegloff (2007: 468), there are *at least* two ways of categorizing any individual – based on sex and age-related criteria – that apply in every known language and culture. “So actual membership in a category is not a sufficient basis or grounds for using it to categorize someone. (In fact, it turns out that actual membership is not only not sufficient, it is not necessary!) So there must be other grounds – grounds of relevance – both for interactional co-participants and for researchers” (Schegloff 2007: 474).

justify (a belief in) their own inability or interpret the example they have seen as somehow ‘exceptional.’

These labels for different kinds of people are linked to other categories and organized into *collections*, which reflect our knowledge, ideas, and expectations about the social world. A collection is a set of categories that ‘go together’ – for example, [father/wife/daughter/sister], [Hindu/Christian/Jew/Muslim], [lawyer/judge/jury/defendant] – and these are not random relations but systematic and empirical associations that apply within (and often across) particular cultures (Schegloff 2007: 467). The examples given are not exhaustive or exclusive; there are other categories that could easily be added to those collections (for example, brother; Buddhist; or bailiff) and still ‘make sense’ (unlike astronaut, which doesn’t fit any of them). Furthermore, the same category may be associated with multiple collections – for example, “professor goes with student, administrator, staff, etc., as ‘campus’ categories on the one hand, and with plumber, doctor, secretary, undertaker as occupational categories on the other” (Schegloff 2007: 467).

Some commonsense collections presuppose certain relationships, either as standardized pairs (husband/wife; student/teacher) or a variety of (prototypical) slots, which are considered ‘normal’ but not necessarily all filled (Francis & Hester 2004: 41). Although there may be cultural or even legal restrictions on category membership in certain contexts, (appropriate age, gender, and number of ‘wives’ for example), often there is also considerable flexibility of interpretation. By categorizing a group of people as a ‘family’ we can highlight salient aspects of their relationship based on (the assumption of) shared social background knowledge, regardless of marital status, gender, or blood-relations.

There are at least three important reasons membership categorization devices (MCD) are relevant for understanding the pragmatics of empowerment: categories are inference rich, protected against induction, and often tied to specific activities. I will briefly describe the first two here, and discuss the concept of category-bound activities in a later section. Categories are ‘inference rich’ in the sense that these labels index a vast amount of commonsense knowledge about what people are like, how they behave, etc., and whatever is ‘known’ about that category is presumed to



apply to members of that category (Schegloff 2007: 469).<sup>36</sup> The act of selecting a specific MCD, choosing to see someone *as a* single-parent or serial-killer, creates the impression that we ‘know’ something about that person, and we often base our interpretations and expectations on that generalized knowledge.

There is a natural stability to our worldview and shared sense of ‘reality’ that makes our commonsense knowledge resistant to revision, even in the face of contradictory evidence or experience: “If an ostensible member of a category appears to contravene what is ‘known’ about members of the category, then people do not revise that knowledge, but see the person as ‘an exception,’ ‘different,’ or even a defective member of the category” (Schegloff 2007: 469). In addition, people who are capable of doing some activity that clearly clashes with the perceived category they ‘obviously’ belong to may be seen as *imitating* that behaviour rather than actually doing it ‘for real’ (Schegloff 2007: 470; Sacks [1966] 1995: 479). Since people also categorize themselves based on the same commonsense expectations, when they fail to meet their own criteria for full or ‘authentic’ membership in a category assigned by others they may see themselves as ‘a phoney’ or ‘a fake’ (Sacks [1967] 1995: 479, 578; cf. Goffman [1971] 1990: 28). Both these interpretations allow people to dismiss their own success and sustain self-limiting beliefs.

Membership categorization devices and our expectations about different kinds of people directly affect the way we ‘make sense’ of the world; however, just because someone *is* a member of a certain category, it does not necessarily mean that narrow definition of ‘who they are’ automatically applies across contexts. Since any person can be categorized in a number of different ways, on an individual level we are forced to consider the *relevance* of alternative membership categorization devices (MCD), and in interaction the choice of an appropriate MCD is complicated by the issue of *convergence*. If one person in a group has been introduced or identified based on membership in a specific category, we have a tendency to try to categorize the other people present according to relevant terms from a common or related collection (Sacks [1966] 1995: 313). For example, introducing one person as a

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<sup>36</sup> “I say ‘known’ rather than ‘believed,’ and refer to ‘(common-sense) knowledge’ rather than ‘stereotype’ or ‘prejudice’ because, for members, this has the working status of ‘knowledge,’ whatever its scientific status or moral/political character may be” (Schegloff 2007: 469).

‘linguistics student’ or ‘jazz pianist’ not only implies the relevance of that categorization (as an individual identity or potential conversation topic), but also subtly establishes a common reference point by activating an entire collection of categories and background knowledge based on academia or music, etc. Of course, these are all negotiable in interaction – we are not rigidly bound by the categories that other people choose – however, in the interest of communication and convergence we tend to cooperate. Deviation from established categories and collections is noticed and assumed to be relevant and motivated rather than random or arbitrary.

#### CATEGORY MEMBERSHIP VS. SOCIAL ROLE

Category membership is not the same as social role, but they often overlap and appear to be almost identical because occupying a particular role may entail membership in a certain category. Social roles reflect specific *social positions*, while categories are understood as *types of people*. Whereas roles tend to be based on *what people do*, categories say something about *who they are*, and roles are related to an *individual's* location within a shared system, institution, or social structure, while category membership refers to a *generalized group of people* with some shared characteristics.

In the *role* of ‘wife’ or ‘mother’ a woman has a clear position within a specific family (structure), which entails various rights and obligations as well power or influence over certain people *within* that family; however, recognizing her as a member of the *category* ‘wives’ or ‘mothers’ is a more generalized observation (or assumption) about the ‘kind’ of person she is, based on commonsense knowledge about roles and relationships within (most) families. This also applies to professors, police officers, and medical doctors – the range of their expertise and social authority is *role-based* and conventionally restricted to certain contexts and activities; however, their category membership may become relevant under other circumstances, for example as an ‘expert witness’ in a legal trial or in response to an accident or emergency. When the man playing with his children identifies himself as a police officer, or the woman in the theatre says she’s a medical doctor, context will affect the interpretation of that utterance. It may be in response to a casual question



about occupation, or they may be actively asserting that role through reference to category membership, which implies that it is immediately relevant.

Understanding the subtle distinction between roles and categories is important for a detailed analysis of empowerment because power and authority are linked to roles within a shared system, but the perception of (im)possibility is often based on category membership or being the right 'kind' of person. In unfamiliar and challenging contexts the relevant criteria for assessing social roles and category membership may be unclear or contested, and good facilitators (or clever participants) can exploit that ambiguity in interaction.

### **Power, status & authority**

Researchers working in pragmatics can demonstrate that discourse and interaction are affected by social relationships and relative status distinctions (e.g. Harris 1995; Leezenberg 2002); "however, power relationships, social distance, role relationships, [and] perceptions of relative rights and obligations ...are not necessarily given, but can be negotiated in interaction" (Thomas 1985: 780). Since any form of social authority requires the implicit collaboration of those involved, it could be argued that there are no 'powerful' people, just powerful roles, relations, and social positions; however, the ability to assert (or claim) powerful roles, put others into certain subject-positions or discourse roles, and control the interpretation of context allows individuals to exploit the system and exercise power on an individual level.

Although the term *power* is widely used in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis, it is often defined in a number of slightly different ways (see Spencer-Oatey 1996). Various scholars have also highlighted cross-cultural variation in the perception of social power distinctions, the expectations associated with social authority, and the type of power that people acknowledge, aspire to, and exploit in interaction (Spencer-Oatey 1992; Wetzel 1993; Thomas 2006). As far as the pragmatics of empowerment is concerned, I am primarily interested in the perception of individual power (i.e. ability/opportunity) and social authority (i.e. influence/expertise), although the issues of control/agency and externally imposed social constraints are also relevant.

Drawing on the work of French and Raven (1959), Spencer-Oatey (1992) describes at least five different types of power in social interaction: *reward* power, based on control of positive outcomes; *coercive* power, based on control over negative outcomes; *expert* power, based on specialized knowledge; *legitimate* power, based on social role, status, etc.; and *referent* power, based on admiration and the desire to be more like the speaker in some respect. Various types of power are often interwoven – for example, the legitimate power of a specific social role may be based on specialized (‘expert’) knowledge and entail control over rewards or punishment – so although there may be different sources of power, a person who has one type of power often (but not always) has other types as well (Spencer-Oatey 1996: 21). However, the ‘legitimate’ power of parents, priests, and politicians only applies to certain people within a specific domain and across a limited range of contexts.

In some situations the relevant roles and expectations are ambiguous, which makes power negotiable in interaction, and some would argue that people with status and authority only have as much power over us as we (implicitly agree to) give them. Expert power only applies if we decide that specialized knowledge is somehow *relevant* to the current situation, and coercive power is only effective if we *care* about potentially negative outcomes (and implicitly agree that they are, in fact, ‘negative’). Since power is often role or context-specific, the activation of certain roles and negotiation of contexts through discourse can be understood as a social power struggle. “Power, whether it be ‘in’ or ‘behind’ discourse, is never definitively held by any one person, or social grouping, because power can be won and exercised only in and through social struggles in which it may also be lost” (Fairclough 1989: 43). As Leezenberg (2002: 902) points out, power is not just an individual attribute or capability (i.e. the power *to* X), but can also refer to a certain kind of relationship *between* individuals (e.g. power *over* X). According to Wetzel (1993), in the West the term power is often associated with domination and control, and therefore has negative connotations for many people; however, not all cultures see a social power imbalance as inherently ‘negative’ or problematic (Spencer-Oatey 1996: 21). For example, in both China and Japan members of unequal dyads (e.g. teacher-student; boss-employee) “are bound together in a role relationship which involves considerable mutual responsibilities, somewhat analogous to a parent-child relationship (Spencer-Oatey 1996: 21). I argue throughout this thesis that there is a



power imbalance between facilitators and participants based on (the perception of) authority and expertise; however, I am using the term power in a very general (i.e. non-technical) sense, and do not mean to suggest that the imbalance is inappropriate in any way. 'Empowerment' implies some kind of power transfer (or increase), and social authority is relevant in my data because it often gives facilitators a distinct communicative advantage and the 'power' to redefine reality for other people, which will be discussed in more detail in the chapters ahead.

### **Ethnomethodology, evidence, & (conversation) analysis**

Although, in one sense, these (social/discourse) roles and power relations are theoretical constructs imposed by analysts in order to discuss the details of language and interaction more precisely; these distinctions and the labels used to describe them are not completely artificial and arbitrary. They are based on the 'commonsense' categories that 'ordinary' people recognize and respond to in 'real' life as they simultaneously produce and participate in their shared social world(s). Duranti argues that "to the extent to which pragmatics is concerned with [meaning in context], it must study the local theories and local practices of particular speakers as heirs of specific cultural traditions" (Duranti 1992 b: 25), and the emphasis on gaining an insider's perspective and establishing locally relevant categories is a strong theme in the ethnography of communication. However, analysts may disagree about the 'evidence' required in the data in order to claim that a certain category, role, or relationship is 'active' and relevant for participants in interaction.

We are all members of multiple categories and embody a variety of social roles and identities, but they are not equally relevant in every context, and there is a long and ongoing debate among analysts about the best way to determine which roles and identities are (most) important to individuals during interaction. At one end of the spectrum, (some) conversation analysts argue that any role or identity used in analysis must be clearly evident in the details of discourse in order to demonstrate that the people who are actually involved are (explicitly) aware of those specific roles; however, many discourse analysts argue that certain roles and relationships are *implicitly* salient in interaction, and social power is still real and relevant even if nobody explicitly acknowledges it (see McHoul, Rapley, & Antaki 2008; Day 2008; Van Dijk 1999b, and the extended debate between Billig (1999a/b) and Schegloff

(1999a/b) in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 10:4). My understanding is that the emphasis on evidence is meant to demonstrate that these concepts and categories emerge from the systematic and structured nature of human interaction itself; they are not simply an eager analyst's attempt to impose order on the data. The goal is not only to describe *what* is happening, but also to explain *why*, based on the 'commonsense' understanding and interpretation of 'ordinary' people.

As far as possible, primarily through participant observation, I have attempted to gain an insider's perspective on the activities and contexts I have chosen to study. In some cases my role in relation to the group was necessarily different from that of the actual participants; nevertheless, through close observation and extended interaction I was able to share in their experience and get a sense of group dynamics – before, during, and after various activities. As a result, I became more aware of the dominant roles and dynamic relationship between participants and facilitators, as well as various categories, roles, and power relations imported from other contexts by the group itself (student/teacher, employer/employee, etc.). Although my observations are based on contextualized examples of natural language use in interaction, my analysis and discussion of the pragmatics of empowerment draws on categories, roles, and relationships that may not be explicit in *every* individual extract. Throughout this chapter I intend to highlight how categories, roles, and power relations are tied together into interpretive frameworks that affect (our perception/interpretation of) the entire context, and illustrate how multiple perspectives on the 'same' situation may be still be 'active' and relevant despite temporary convergence on a 'shared' reality. Alternative roles and relationships are implicitly active in the sense that they remain accessible as legitimate options or potential resources in the negotiation of context and meaning in interaction.

### **Speech events, activity type, & category-bound activities**

If context describes *where* we are, and various roles or categories say something about *who* we are, concepts like 'speech event' and 'activity type' focus primarily on *what we're doing*; however, this is just another aspect of interaction, and all these terms reflect a difference in emphasis and orientation. Our interpretation of context, participants' roles or power relations, and the purpose of an event or activity are all interrelated. My reason for discussing them separately is to highlight the complexity



of social interaction, pull these threads of theory together into a coherent foundation for the analysis ahead, and establish various connections between my own research and previous work in related areas.

Sometimes the easiest way to explain the context of an utterance is simply to refer to what the people involved were *doing* at the time, by emphasizing a specific event or activity. Rather than Hymes' (1962) somewhat static description of *speech events*, Levinson's (1979) notion of *activity type* is a more useful starting point for my analysis because it deals directly with pragmatic parameters and the emphasis is on how people use their linguistic resources to actively 'shape' an event as they try to achieve their goals (Thomas 1995: 190-192). According to Levinson, each activity type is a *goal-defined social event* – for example, teaching, a job interview, a football game, or a task in a workshop – with certain constraints on participants, setting, and allowable contributions (Levinson 1979: 368). Different sets of expectations are associated with different activity types, and some allow more individual freedom and variation than others.

Earlier, in the section on membership categorization, I briefly mentioned Sacks' concept of *category-bound activities* (Sacks [1966/1967] 1995). Basically, some actions, activities, or forms of conduct are strongly associated with membership in a specific category. Our 'commonsense' knowledge about different kinds of people includes knowledge about some of the things those people typically do, and our concept of certain activities includes an awareness of what kind(s) of people are usually involved. For example, 'performing open-heart surgery' and 'flying a commercial airliner' are category-bound activities in the sense that we *expect* them to be done by a suitably qualified surgeon or pilot; other (kinds of) people *can* do them, but not under 'normal' circumstances.<sup>37</sup> This applies not only to professional activities and related roles or specialized skills, but also to activities that are characteristic of any category – 'giving birth' is bound to pregnant women,<sup>38</sup> while 'learning to walk' and 'learning to drive' are typically associated with a particular

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<sup>37</sup> Although similar to *felicity conditions* (Austin 1962), this concept includes speech acts (i.e. activities that are actually *done* with words) but is not restricted to them.

<sup>38</sup> Although some associations seem to be based on natural or logical entailment (like 'birth' and 'pregnancy'), other category-bound activities simply reflect 'commonsense' assumptions, which are often culture-specific and may seem naïve, illogical, or even prejudiced to other people.

age or life-stage. Therefore, doing or reporting an activity that is category-bound can allude to the category membership of a particular person, establish its relevance in interaction, and implicitly ‘activate’ the entire network of commonsense background knowledge (or the membership categorization device) it is associated with (Schegloff 2007: 470; cf. Sacks 1995). This is useful and important for practical empowerment because participants are often faced with unfamiliar and challenging activities and the relevant categories are unknown or negotiable – the goal is to use these *activities* to justify personal changes in *category membership*, in the sense that facing fears and overcoming self-imposed limitations involves *becoming a different kind of person*.

### **Framing**

Framing is a useful analytical concept that combines our dynamic understanding of context and the various ways we ‘make sense’ of social interaction in terms of categories, roles, relationships, and activities into a general orientation, perspective, or point of view. According to Lakoff (1999: 163), the notion of (mental) ‘perspective’ derives from the extraordinarily common conceptual metaphor THINKING IS PERCEIVING, which projects our logic of vision onto our logic of knowledge.<sup>39</sup> The whole concept of ‘framing’ is fundamentally metaphorical – based on the underlying idea that KNOWING IS SEEING – and the general idea is that different *frames of interpretation* affect understanding by drawing attention to certain aspects of experience, which effectively leads people to ‘see’ the world in different ways.

Specific frames don’t capture *all* the details and social distinctions; instead they focus on one particular set of roles and relationships to highlight a few salient features. Although similar to context models and membership categorization devices, I find the visual metaphor quite powerful because so often empowerment is about changing the way people ‘look at’ a problem, event, or experience, ‘opening their eyes’ to new options and hidden potential, or triggering a ‘shift in perspective’ that allows them to respond and interact with the world in different ways. By weaving together the various strands of sense-making into a dynamic, collaborative, and negotiable concept of ‘shared’ reality I want to focus on the (inter)active process

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<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed mapping and analysis of this metaphor see Lakoff (1999: 162-163) or Lakoff & Johnson (1999). Conceptual metaphor is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.



of framing that allows one person to affect the perception, interpretation, and experience of another (through discourse).

The ‘frame’ concept was introduced by Bateson ([1972] 2000) and later elaborated by Goffman (1974), who pre-emptively addressed the issues of hybridity and frames-within-frames by drawing on Shutz’s notion of multiple realities (Linell & Thunqvist 2003: 412; Shutz 1962). However, since the term ‘frame’ still comes across as fairly static, I prefer to work with a more *interactive* notion of framing, which refers to a deliberate attempt to influence another person’s interpretation of context (cf. Linell & Thunqvist 2003: 412; MacLachlan & Reid 1994). Although ‘framing’ has been applied in slightly different ways by academics in various disciplines – including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, cognitive psychology, political science, and artificial intelligence – in relation to talk in interaction, it generally refers to participants’ orientation to the immediate context and their working ‘definition’ of the situation. According to Agne (2007), having a frame involves having a name for the situation, activity, or interaction and a set of expectations associated with that name. Within Fillmore’s ‘frame semantics’ the word frame is used as a general cover term for a related set of concepts, including script, schema, scenario, cognitive model, and folk theory (Fillmore [1982] 2007: 238; Fillmore & Atkins 1992; Fillmore 1985). Fairclough refers to frames, scripts, and schema as “three very broad dimensions of a highly complex network of mental representations,” and describes a process whereby verbal and textual cues ‘evoke’ aspects of social background knowledge that “colour the way in which subsequent cues are interpreted” (Fairclough 1989: 159). According to Tannen & Wallat (1987: 347), ‘frame’ and related terms like ‘script’ and ‘schema’ all reflect various *structures of expectation*; however, unlike abstract and predetermined patterns or models, *frames* emerge through interaction as people make sense of their current situation in relation to other people and (ideally) converge on a common understanding of what’s going on, and “many analysts of authentic communicative activities have pointed out that there may be several competing framings in the same talk” (Linell & Thunqvist 2003: 412).

A change in ‘footing’ is another way of talking about the change in orientation (towards the message itself and/or other people present) that occurs as a result of

frame-shifting (Goffman 1981: 128). However, there is more involved than simply switching from one stance or alignment to another; often we are able to put our previous position (and discourse role) ‘on hold’ while we momentarily speak ‘in a different voice’ or adopt a different role, and then easily return to our previous alignment. So clearly “we can hold the same footing across several of our turns at talk. And within one alignment, another can be fully enclosed” (Goffman 1981: 155). This observation is relevant to many of the examples I have analysed, where multiple interpretive frames appear to be active but effectively ‘on hold’ and people seamlessly shift from one orientation or alignment to another as they express their ideas and make sense of other people’s actions or utterances.

My understanding is that framing is a motivated, goal-oriented process involving discourse and interaction, which draws on various aspects of commonsense background knowledge as a social and conceptual resource in a deliberate attempt to change another person’s perspective and interpretation. Although people may have vastly different sociocultural background knowledge and context models due to specialized education, professional socialization, and unique life experiences, in interaction they typically attempt to establish a shared situational definition and conceptual orientation.<sup>40</sup> This may be implicitly assumed or actively negotiated, but it is an essential aspect of interpretation because it allows people to ‘make sense’ of both language and behaviour through context and activity-based expectations. Framing is the active process whereby participants select a particular situational definition, (based on context, categories, and activity type plus any roles or expectations they entail), and assert it as the appropriate interpretive frame for the present moment.

The same situation can be ‘framed’ in several different ways, and with each new frame participants may adjust their language and behaviour as they orient themselves towards different (discourse and/or social) roles. Although Agne (2007: 570) argues

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<sup>40</sup> This assumes that the people involved are willing/able to communicate, cooperate, and compromise in order to converge on a shared understanding of the situation. However, interpersonal conflict is also a form of interaction and in some cases the opposing parties may be so attached to their respective positions/perspectives that they attempt to assert or impose a particular interpretive frame as the most relevant or legitimate without seriously considering the other options. Moral conflicts can be particularly problematic in this regard, because they are not just disagreements about issues but are often based on fundamentally different assumptions about reality (see Agne 2007; cf. Freeman, Littlejohn, & Pearce 1992: 313).



that reframing is not necessarily a conscious strategy in everyday social interaction, it can highlight certain categories and assert/imply the relevance of specific social roles. At any moment there may be several optional interpretive frames available simultaneously, allowing individuals to deliberately select the frame that reflects their needs and interests or strategically shift between frames to achieve their communicative and/or social goals. However, in some situations different yet equally legitimate frames overlap and interpenetrate without apparent conflict or competition – that is to say, two (or more) distinct situational definitions or activity types may be *in use* as relevant interpretive frames simultaneously – in which case the context can be described in terms of embedded frames-within-frames or ‘multiple realities’ as there is clearly more than one thing ‘going on’ at once. This concept of ‘multiple realities’ applies to many of the contexts and activities I have observed. Although participants are often engaged in superficially goal-oriented activities, from another perspective there is a deeper purpose implicit in the entire context that involves teaching, (experiential) education, and empowerment (cf. Linell & Thunqvist 2003: 413). Under these circumstances there are multiple interpretations of ‘what is going on’ and in the absence of a unified/shared definition of the situation participants may orient to several goals simultaneously (Linell & Thunqvist 2003: 409).

For the remainder of this chapter I focus on extracts from my own data that provide illustrative examples of framing in interaction, and discuss the dynamic and goal-oriented nature of strategic frame-shifting in various contexts. This chapter deals primarily with overlapping perspectives that are grounded in a shared sense of ‘objective’ reality, whereas the next chapter examines the collaborative creation of explicitly *imaginary* realities.

### *Experiential Education*

Framing is central to practical empowerment, and the underlying conceptual metaphor – KNOWING IS SEEING – provides a subtle yet frequent reminder that this important interpersonal work is fundamentally about changing the way people ‘see’ themselves or altering their ‘perspective’ on the world in positive ways. This chapter focuses on the discourse features of framing in interaction and discusses interpretation in terms of the theoretical concepts previously introduced – context,

categories, activities, roles, and power relations – based on extracts from naturalistic data collected in a variety of different contexts. These relatively ‘ordinary’ examples of framing and frame-shifting also establish a foundation for the discussion of more complex and challenging topics in subsequent chapters.

One thing these initial examples have in common across contexts is their implicit appeal to a shared sense of ‘objective’ reality; in other words, the existence of the *real world* is presupposed. In order to facilitate the desired change in perspective and interpretation, the people in charge (i.e. facilitators) exploit the commonsense assumption that we all live in the *same* world (and they know a little bit more about it). In these contexts it’s not about subjective interpretation or debating the merits of different points of view; it’s about providing new and relevant information that ‘clarifies’ participants’ perception of the ‘truth’ or ‘facts.’ Whether it’s abseiling, hypnotherapy, or firewalking, these activities are deliberately *framed* in a way that makes what is learned *real*, rather than just an interesting idea.

### **Multiple-realities at the Conway Centre**

Although implicitly grounded in a shared sense of reality, we often orient ourselves to specific layers or aspects of it depending on our immediate needs or goals; that is to say, not everything we know about the world is equally relevant all the time, so we choose to focus on the most important information and temporarily ignore the rest. This applies to our understanding of both the natural and social worlds – for example, successfully launching a space-shuttle requires a more refined understanding and appreciation of physics and aerodynamics than simply playing frisbee with a friend, and making a ‘polite’ request can be more or less complicated depending on what you need and who you ask. Different ways of framing the situation effectively define it in different ways, simultaneously hiding and highlighting various aspects of the ‘big picture’; however, sometimes we’re trying to do more than one thing at once, and in an unfamiliar context the relevant roles and categories may be under-specified or ambiguous.

During much of the interaction I observed at the *Conway Centre*, an outdoor-pursuits centre in North Wales, there is evidence that participants are aware of multiple interpretive frames and pursue several goals simultaneously, adjusting their working



definition of ‘what’s going on’ accordingly. Since this is a large residential centre that regularly attracts educational groups from primary and secondary schools around Wales and England, participants typically travel from home by bus with a large group of staff and peers from their school. They often spend an entire week living and learning together in this new and exciting environment, engaged in a variety of organized activities from breakfast to bedtime. For most participants, the entire journey – from the moment they leave home until their safe return at the end of the week – is an *event* (specifically, a ‘school trip’), with many other activities embedded within it from beginning to end.<sup>41</sup> This event becomes the background context for everything else that happens here, and at any given moment students will have at least two alternative interpretations and answers for the question – *What are we doing here?* – and this is the foundation for ‘multiple realities’ or frames-within-frames.

Participants have already upset their ordinary routines just by getting on the bus and travelling to North Wales; however, in making sense of this new environment they draw on conceptual resources and previous experience from within the *educational frame*. In other words, although they may be out in the forest, canoeing on the sea, or abseiling into a gorge they still ‘see’ it as an extension of *school*, and import various ‘commonsense’ expectations from that domain.<sup>42</sup> Although they may be friends as well, by travelling with a group of teachers and classmates on an organized school trip the relevant roles and power relations are already ‘active’ and there is a tendency to categorize new people based on the same collection or membership categorization device (MCD). Within this frame the other young people visiting the centre are all ‘students’ from different schools (rather than cities or countries) and the people in charge are all ‘teachers’ (except for the ‘head teacher’ or an occasional parent acting as chaperone). Facilitators are referred to as “Sir” or “Miss” by students, and even when they would prefer to not be categorized alongside the other teachers in order to interact with students in a different way, they are often ‘forced’

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<sup>41</sup> Even those who attend for a single day may still see it as a distinct *event* because the various activities at the centre are ‘connected’ to each other and make sense within this specialized context, but are disconnected or set apart as a whole from the ordinary activities of daily life.

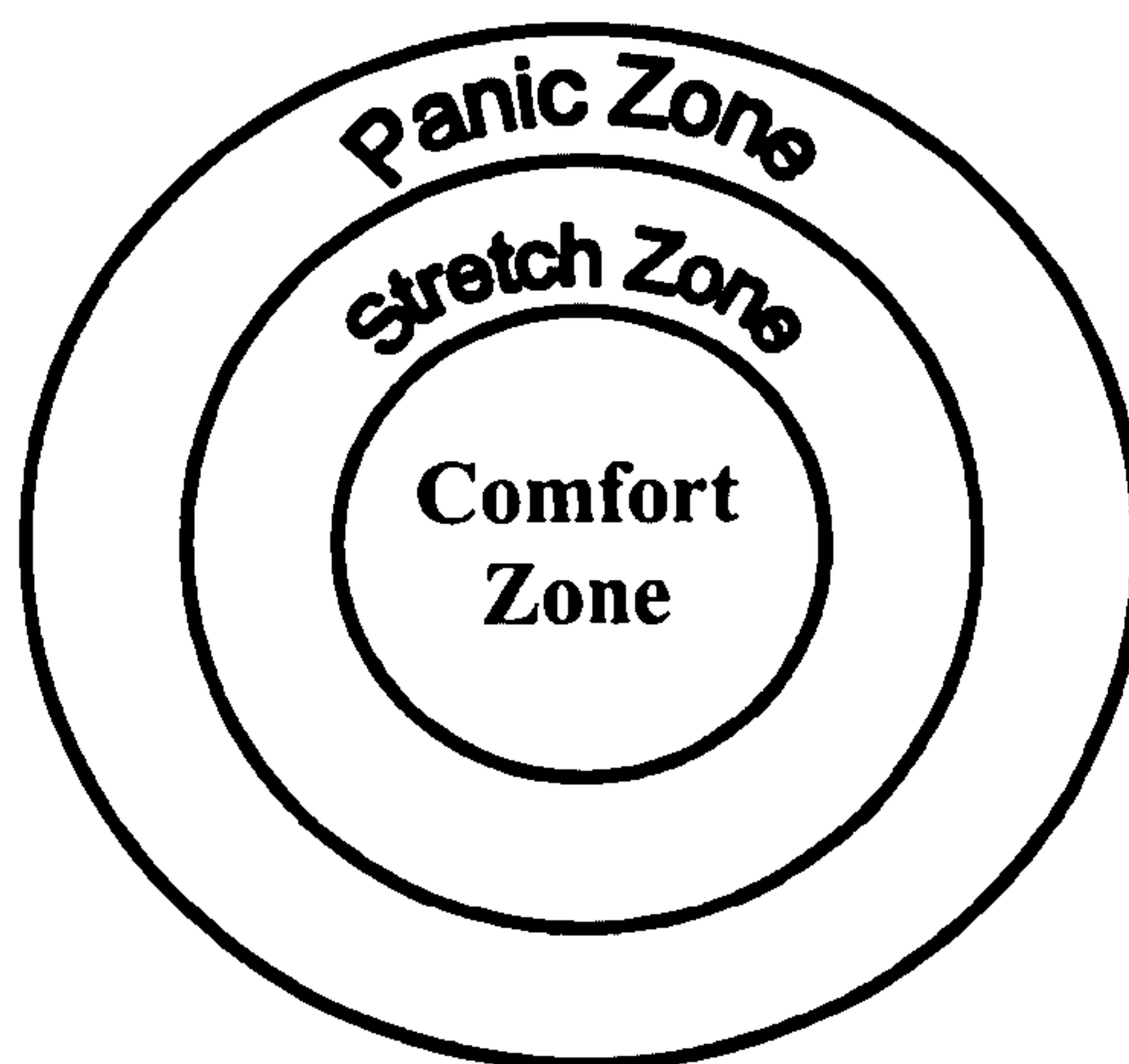
<sup>42</sup> With groups of older students or adults the same principle applies, but the expectations are often based on university or work-related categories, roles, and power relations; however, due to various contextual cues and the presence of large groups of children, adults may also conform to school-based norms and expectations.

into this role or subject-position simply by being spoken to or treated *as* a teacher. Although the adults present often establish rapport amongst themselves on a first name basis, facilitators frequently reinforce the educational frame by referring to specific adults that arrived with the group as “Miss” or “Sir” when speaking to the children, thereby collaborating in the maintenance of this particular perspective.

Meanwhile on any given day, *within* the broad background context of a school trip, there are dozens of other activities going on – getting dressed, eating meals, attending meetings or classes; playing, flirting, fighting, etc. However, there is a specific sub-set of activities that are particularly relevant because they are the primary reason for being there; they are, in fact, ‘the point’ of the entire trip. Groups come to the Conway Centre in order to engage in various specialized activities, led by well-trained and fully qualified instructors, which are deliberately designed to challenge the group and improve teamwork, cooperation, and self-confidence. These are the activities I’m most interested in because they provide insight into the pragmatics of empowerment.

### **Comfort zone, stretch zone, & panic zone**

According to public presentations and promotional material obtained from the Conway Centre, the purpose of these activities is “to encourage young people to take a step outside their normal comfort zone with our support and the help of the other members of the group. By doing this in a safe and supportive learning environment, confidence, ability, and self-esteem will increase” (Conway Centre power-point presentation). The following image is used to illustrate this concept:



(Conway Centre power-point slide)



Similar models are widely used within experiential education, but the labels are slightly different in various sources. Beard & Wilson (2006: 270) refer to the stretch zone as the *challenge* zone, while Luckner & Nadler (1997: 20) highlight the internal struggle at the edge of one's comfort zone by distinguishing between the *groan* zone and the *growth* zone:

Through involvement in experiences that are beyond one's comfort zone, individuals are forced to move into an area that feels uncomfortable and unfamiliar – the groan zone. By overcoming these anxious feelings and thoughts of self-doubt while simultaneously sampling success, individuals move from the groan zone to the growth zone.

(Luckner & Nadler 1997: 20)

During the initial group orientation at the beginning of the day I have heard facilitators verbally explain this concept to participants, seen it illustrated several times on a classroom whiteboard, and actively participated in a group exercise based on the same image: Three large circles were laid out on the ground in the same pattern as the picture above and participants were asked to physically move from one zone to another to indicate their relative comfort level with various activities (e.g. 'watching telly' or 'speaking in front of a large audience' etc.). In this way, facilitators frame the entire day in terms of these underlying concepts from the very beginning and subtly set up expectations for the activities ahead. People are never forced to do anything against their will, but they are gently pushed into their 'stretch zone' and explicitly encouraged to face their fears, examine any self-limiting beliefs or ideas, and use their experience at the Conway Centre to permanently expand their 'comfort zone.'

Although there is a strong emphasis in some programmes on outdoor-pursuits such as canoeing or rock-climbing, there are also several 'problem-solving' activities that provide more of a mental challenge and allow participants to develop leadership and communication skills as they try to work together. The activities planned for each group are broadly based on the age, interests, and goals of the participants; however, facilitators also have considerable flexibility to adapt the meaning or purpose of each activity to suit the needs of the group, and this is often accomplished through framing. Whether it's abseiling down a cliff or trying to get the entire group through

an obstacle course while blindfolded, each activity is defined by its own internal roles and goals; however, the underlying purpose of *all* the activities is primarily educational. So even when participants are fully focused on a specific task – or operating within the *task frame* – the underlying *educational frame* is still active and available.

### **Strategic frame-shifting**

Both facilitators and participants are aware of the educational frame and the embedded task frame simultaneously, and shifting between them serves particular social functions in interaction. Frame-shifting is *strategic* in the sense that it is deliberate and goal-oriented – it doesn't just happen. At least one person is choosing to initiate a shift in perspective, and in most cases the others implicitly collaborate by appropriately modifying their own behaviour.

Each frame is associated with a different orientation and working definition of the situation, context, and activity – essentially a different perspective on 'what's going on' – and each frame entails slightly different roles and expectations for the various people involved. These are not necessarily static, but since some categories are conventionally associated with specific activities (such as 'teaching' or 'discipline/punishment' in an educational context), even subtle changes in behaviour can trigger a switch into an interpretive frame that highlights certain relationships and *puts* people into particular social roles or subject-positions.

One interesting and salient difference between the underlying educational frame and any specific task frame is the nature of legitimate leadership roles: Within the educational frame the leader of each group is a staff member trained to facilitate and supervise these activities; however, within the task frame that individual and adult observers like myself are no longer actively part of the group, so the functions of the leader must be redistributed and renegotiated among relative equals as they tackle the task scenario. Other teachers or adults that have travelled with the students (and are visiting the centre for the first time) are typically integrated into the group *as participants*, surrendering their school-based role and authority in order to take part in the activity as an ordinary member of the team. However, the staff member's facilitator role is so rooted in the reality of the educational frame that any



intervention on their part during the task itself necessitates a frame shift that effectively puts the task reality ‘on hold.’

In one session, during a group-skiing exercise,<sup>43</sup> I saw a facilitator do this explicitly and strategically by shouting, “Everybody freeze!” before providing feedback on the group’s progress and suggestions for improvement. Everyone else remained silent and physically motionless while she shared her observations (regarding communication skills, group dynamics, and other broadly educational goals), and then she explicitly switched the group back into active task mode. On another occasion a different facilitator said “Stop!” before beginning to provide feedback and ask probing (educational) questions such as, “Is this working? Why not?” – effectively ‘pausing’ activity in the task frame. At another point during the same skiing exercise the facilitator used a strategic frame-shift to redefine the purpose of the activity in response to one participant’s (P) refusal to participate:

IT’S NOT REAL – DON’T WORRY ABOUT IT!

*Group-skiing exercise:*

P: I don’t like this...

I can’t do it Miss. I just can’t...

Staff: You can’t? You can’t what?

Is this important? It’s not *real*. Don’t worry about it! What’s more important, being able to do it well or being part of the team?

P: Part of the team... [*moves to rejoin the group*]

Staff: Good.

(Field notes)

Note the appeal to a shared sense of reality and a world beyond the immediate task frame, which undermines her objections and (paradoxically) encourages participation by framing the activity as relatively unimportant in relation to the ‘real’ world: “Is this important? It’s not *real*. Don’t worry about it!” This subtle shift in perspective allows the participant to take her individual ability or preconceived ideas of ‘success’ less seriously and focus instead on “being part of the team.”

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<sup>43</sup> One pair of wooden skis long enough for 8-10 people to stand on – their task was simply to communicate and cooperate in order to get from point A to point B together as quickly as possible.

Since framing is fundamentally collaborative, frame-shifts can be successfully initiated (to different degrees) by almost anyone involved, and participants can also use frame-shifting to achieve their interactional objectives by exploiting the norms and expectations associated with different frames. The task frame and educational frame are each associated with different context models and behavioural constraints; therefore, the perception of relative rights, obligations, power and politeness may shift in response to a new interpretive frame, which can affect not only membership categorization and social roles, but discourse roles as well. In this extract, taken from the same group-skiing exercise, a female participant (Q) is having difficulty getting her ideas heard and acknowledged, so she strategically shifts into the educational frame in order to gain the attention of her fellow group members (Grp).

WHAT ARE YOU TELLING ME FOR?

*Group-skiing exercise:*

Grp: [*Overlapping speech as multiple speakers try to direct the group, debate various ideas, and gain control of the discussion...*]

Q: Miss, can I just say something? [*turning to face the facilitator*]  
I really think we should just pick one person to yell out “One, two, three, left! One, two, three, right!” so we’ll all move at the same time.

Staff: Fine, good idea. What are you telling me for?  
Don’t tell me, talk to your group!

(Field notes)

When understood in terms of frame-shifting and discourse roles the answer to the staff member’s question becomes obvious: What appears to be a request to address the facilitator is actually a strategic frame-shift designed to force her fellow participants into a different discourse role – specifically, one where they have lost their speaking rights and have no choice but to hear her ideas. As noted earlier, the facilitator’s role and authority are rooted in the educational frame, which implicitly activates a conceptual network of social norms and commonsense background knowledge associated with school and subtly imposes specific constraints on individual behaviour based on well-established social roles and power relations.

Initially, within the task frame, several people were competing for control of the floor and the (discourse) role of speaker, but none of the participants had a more legitimate claim to authority than anybody else; however, the instant this girl



addresses “Miss” the educational frame dramatically redefines the situation. Typically, (or ideally), in an educational context only one person speaks at a time and the others politely listen, especially when addressing an adult in a position of authority. So the instant the facilitator becomes the addressee, the girl legitimately gains exclusive control of the floor as speaker, and everyone else is subtly recast in the (discourse) role of auditors – able to hear their dialogue, but with drastically reduced speaking rights. Nevertheless, it’s clear from the content of her utterance that her fellow participants are actually the intended audience for her task-oriented suggestion. It’s not so much an appeal to authority as the exploitation of (perceived) authority through association; singling out another participant as an addressee would not have had the same effect because everyone is (more or less) equal in the task frame.

This appears to be an example of one clever girl exploiting the facilitator’s power in an alternative frame in order to get her group’s attention and address them indirectly; however, like all framing, it relies on *collaboration* in social interaction. Although it doesn’t appear in the transcript above, the facilitator (non-verbally) acknowledged the girl’s initial question/request, which established the ground for dialogue between them and effectively granted or authorized the frame-shift – if the facilitator had simply ignored the question I doubt the shift would have been successful. In addition, the other group members chose to interpret their dialogue in terms of the educational frame, and voluntarily changed their own behaviour accordingly. Nobody forced them into silence, and they could have just as easily ignored the exchange between the student and facilitator as irrelevant, or interpreted it as a private/personal conversation, which would have left their own discourse roles and rights in the task frame unaltered. This illustrates the complexity of framing in social interaction, and highlights the implicit collaboration that occurs in the creation and negotiation of context.

### **Reframing the perception of safety, risk, & success**

In the next example I show how staff at the Conway Centre use framing to change participants’ perception of the safety equipment. By exploiting their position of authority and expertise within the educational frame and emphasizing the distinction between ‘real’ vs. ‘perceived’ risk, facilitators are able to alter the way people *see*

ordinary ropes and climbing equipment. Perceived risk is part of the task scenario, which makes the task more exciting and challenging; however, the safety of the group is the facilitator's responsibility and firmly rooted in the 'real' world. As a result of their specialized training and previous experience, facilitators (are assumed to) have a privileged perspective and 'expert' knowledge of these activities, which gives them the power to override other people's 'commonsense' in this context.

'SEEING' THE SAFETY FEATURES OF ORDINARY CLIMBING EQUIPMENT

*Prior to abseiling & the high ropes-course: (three separate extracts)*

Staff: This isn't just one rope, it's actually ten ropes woven into one, and *each* of those little ropes inside could support a whole family in a Ford Fiesta, just on its own. And together I could put all of us in the mini-bus and hoist it up with this rope and it *still* wouldn't break.

---[cut]---

...and you're not just on *one* rope – you've got two of these! It's totally safe.

Staff: Each one of these gets tested before it's sold, and this karabiner could support the weight of ten elephants before it would break.

Staff: It's not the people that are holding you, it's the device that's holding you, that's what you've got to trust. Make sense? Sound all right? If it were myself going up, and a nine year-old girl on this end, I'd feel quite safe, as long as she's competent with the device.  
[Referring to a 'gri gri' style belay device].

(Field notes)

'Objectively' students and staff seem to be in exactly the same situation or context – they are standing in the same location, looking at the same objects, and presumably share a basic commonsense understanding of what these things are (i.e. a rope, karabiner<sup>44</sup>, and belay<sup>45</sup> device). Physically, visually, they *see* the same things; however, through language the staff members lead participants to 'see' more – highlighting 'facts' that are otherwise invisible<sup>46</sup> – and through the implicit acceptance of that 'reality' a subsequent shift in perspective and understanding occurs, which (ideally) makes people feel more safe.

<sup>44</sup> Karabiner: (also carabiner; often shortened to 'biner in conversation) "a coupling device consisting of a metal oval or D-shaped link with a gate protected against accidental opening" (OED: karabiner).

<sup>45</sup> Belay: (verb) "To safeguard another climber with the rope. ...In old-fashioned belays, the belayer wrapped the rope around his body to create friction in case of a fall. Most climbers today use friction-creating 'belay devices' that attach to their harnesses and allow small climbers, even children, to stop the falls of much larger climbers" ([www.stikage.com/guide\\_glossary.htm](http://www.stikage.com/guide_glossary.htm)).

<sup>46</sup> Invisible 'facts' such as the strength and internal composition of the rope etc.



The relevant features are described in terms that are easily imagined and understood. The point isn't the precise breaking point of a rope or karabiner, but the general idea that a car full of people is much heavier than an 11 year-old boy, and if something can support the weight of ten elephants then it can easily support a single person. When the staff make these claims there is no argument about whether it's *really* one rope or ten, or whether or not these tests with a Ford Fiesta would actually work – thanks to the perception (or assumption) of experience, authority, and expertise that comes with their age, category membership, and social role in this context, facilitators are actually in a position to *redefine* the relevant aspects of reality. The truth-conditions of these utterances are irrelevant, because it's the difference in perspective that is important. Although participants may be caught up in a world of adrenaline and perceived risk, facilitators are aware of the *real* risk involved because they do these kinds of things every day, as part of their job in the *real* world. These (exaggerated) examples simply illustrate the 'fact' that facilitators know more about the equipment and activities than most people. If a staff member says it is (relatively) safe, then it probably *is*. In addition, facilitators effectively create a healthy sense of uncertainty around new and challenging situations, which implies that the world might not be quite as scary as it sometimes seems and encourages participants to question their self-limiting beliefs about everyday life as well. Although they cannot necessarily change people's fundamental assumptions about the nature of the universe, on a limited scale they have the power to tell people what they are looking at, how to interpret their experience, and why participants are actually capable of more than they think they are. Rather than challenging claims that seem to contradict their own perception, participants often accept the staff member's point of view as more accurate and, in that sense, more *real*.<sup>47</sup>

However, it's also worth noting that staff members are subtly directing participants' attention to aspects of the safety equipment that cannot be tested or easily refuted, and in that sense *hiding* as much as they *highlight*. While it's true that good climbing

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<sup>47</sup> I have noticed over the past three years that a PhD student who claims to be actively investigating people's assumptions about their own limitations also acquires a certain amount of power to redefine the perception of possibility for other people. Simply the fact that I'm 'doing my PhD on it' adds credibility to my claims, allowing me to openly challenge or contradict 'common-sense' without sounding (too) crazy and convince people to attempt things they may have previously dismissed as 'impossible.'

ropes and karabiners are extremely strong, if you fall off a cliff (or high ropes-course) it's the *length* of the rope rather than the *strength* of the rope that determines whether or not you hit the ground. In the case of climbing and most of the high ropes-course the participants' safety is literally in the hands of their peers, and although precautions are taken to make it as safe as possible, it's impossible to guarantee that other people will respond appropriately in a moment of crisis. "By far the most important threat to the safety of the participants on the usual form of ropes course is their own error in the clipping and unclipping of safety links or that of the instructor in setting up and supervising the activity" (Barton 2007: 20). Part of the activity is learning to trust each other, communicate, and work together; however, in the beginning it's much easier (and arguably more effective) to create a sense of trust in the safety equipment rather than in someone's equally inexperienced peers. This is what the facilitator is doing when he says, "It's not the people that are holding you, it's the device that's holding you, that's what you've got to trust."

In the same way that framing can be used to change people's perception of the safety equipment, it can also be used to alter the way somebody 'sees' a particularly challenging situation or activity. The following example demonstrates how the facilitator strategically reframes a potential 'fear of heights' as a 'fear of falling' and pre-emptively gets every group member to agree to attempt the activity no matter how they feel.

IT'S NOT NECESSARILY THE HEIGHT THAT YOU'RE AFRAID OF

*Prior to abseiling down a coastal cliff:*

Staff: It's not necessarily the height that you're afraid of here, it's the thought of falling, and there's no chance that that will happen, ok? Because you'll be attached to two ropes. I'll tell you all about the ropes and how much they can hold and that at the top. All I want from you, ok, is to dig really deep and give everything a go, ok? Is that fair enough?

Grp: yeah [*overlapping speakers; same response*]

Staff: yeah? I don't, I don't mind if you cry, I don't care if you scream all the way down. But I'd like you to sort of give it a go, so you can actually turn around in the end and go "wow, I wanna do that again!"

(Field notes)



In convincing participants to challenge themselves and step outside their comfort zone the facilitator gains a strategic advantage by reframing a fear of *heights* as a fear of *falling*. The cliff itself is (relatively) high, and regardless of what anybody says that is not going to change; however, if the issue is actually a fear of falling then the safety equipment makes an obvious and meaningful difference. In this extract the facilitator also explicitly clarifies his expectations for the group (i.e. to dig deep and give everything a go), but continues to implicitly frame this activity in terms of 'challenge by choice' and create (the impression of) a shared perspective by leading participants to agree that these expectations are fair and verbally commit to trying the activity.

The idea of abseiling for the first time can be quite intimidating, even when you know the ropes are secure and you've already seen several of your peers succeed. The question isn't whether or not it's (humanly) possible, but whether or not it's possible *for you*. Allowing the rope to fully take your weight at the very beginning is often explicitly framed as 'the hardest part' because, although it looks easy, you must completely trust the safety equipment, and I have seen clever facilitators use several personalized strategies to lead reluctant participants to sit down or step back off the edge of the cliff. All the safety ropes are secured in advance, and the participant's attention and eye-contact are deliberately held through gentle, continuous dialogue as they are led into an appropriate position to begin the abseil. Some experiential educators advocate 'freezing' participants at this point and highlighting the feelings that arise in those critical moments before success or retreat (see Luckner & Nadler 1997); however, others prefer to move through the moment of crisis quite quickly and emphasize the fun and feeling of accomplishment afterward. For example, I watched one facilitator effectively *dance* an extremely frightened girl off the edge of the cliff (with one step forward, two steps back, etc.) by keeping her engaged in a conversation about a popular television show called *Strictly Come Dancing*. This strategic use of language to capture another person's full attention and keep them consciously preoccupied while leading them to engage in some other activity has parallels in the practice of hypnotherapy, which will become more apparent in the chapters ahead.

Staff at the Conway Centre also use framing to explicitly redefine ‘the point’ of intimidating activities (such as indoor rock-climbing or certain ropes-course elements) in ways that allow participants to ‘succeed’ on a number of different levels, regardless of how well their peers perform on the same task. With abseiling everyone starts at the top of a cliff and comes down to the ground, so ‘success’ is fairly unambiguous – there is no opportunity to stop halfway; participants either go all the way or not at all.<sup>48</sup> However, with rock-climbing the participants all start at ground level and facilitators have more flexibility to frame the overall purpose of the activity. Similar to the abseiling example above, the point of this activity is to challenge yourself and overcome fear, but getting to the top is not essential to succeed.

IT'S NOT REALLY ABOUT GETTING ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP

*Prior to an indoor climbing session:*

Staff: We're gonna do a lot of different, a lot of fun things in here today, and we're gonna learn a lot about climbing. But it's not really about getting all the way to the top. It's about challenging yourself and working together, with good teamwork and safety.

(Field notes)

Framing the activity in terms of ‘personal challenges’ rather than an external or norm-referenced standard allows staff to emphasize that each individual responds to the situation in a different way, and what may be easy for one person can be quite challenging for another. Staff members use their authority as specialized ‘teachers’ to deliberately deconstruct participants’ commonsense assumptions and cultivate a shared perspective that changes the nature of the activity, reduces some participants’ anxiety, and encourages group members to support each other. For example, at the beginning of an indoor climbing session facilitators will often ask, “What’s the BIGGEST climb you can do on this wall?” and participants are generally a bit puzzled because all the routes seem to be approximately the same length/height – from floor to ceiling. However, the facilitators will then demonstrate that it’s also possible to climb *along* the wall from left to right, never more than three feet off the ground, in order to emphasize that the skill required and the challenge of climbing has nothing to do with how high you go. This effectively makes the ‘biggest’ climb

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<sup>48</sup> That being said, in the case of extreme fear simply standing at the edge of the cliff with a facilitator can be framed as a success, and the participant is given the option to either walk back down the path to the bottom of the cliff or abseil down while securely attached to the facilitator.



(or challenge) accessible to all and allows everyone to enjoy the activity, even if they have a fear of heights. Most participants still choose to climb from floor to ceiling if they can, but since getting to the top isn't 'the point' it means the people who fall off or choose not to go all the way up can still participate and push themselves without feeling like a failure in comparison to anyone else. Strategic framing allows everyone to focus on an individual and subjective sense of accomplishment rather than the failure of a few to achieve some arbitrary and external standard, which is far more effective for building self-esteem and empowering people.

### *Hypnotherapy*

In the next set of examples I highlight the parallels between experiential/outdoor education and other methods of empowerment, drawing on data from a hypnotherapy session conducted in Canada to demonstrate how framing affects interaction and experience in a completely different context. Similar to that of the staff at the Conway Centre, the goal of clinical hypnotherapists is to facilitate an experience that triggers specific changes in perception or interpretation, which (ideally) leads to personal growth and positive change in other contexts. What makes hypnotherapy particularly interesting is that the entire experience is *created* through discourse and interaction. Although the subjective experience of hypnosis occurs internally, the relevant roles are *real* and the activity (or state) itself is grounded in a shared sense of reality.

#### **The negotiation of context, roles, & categories**

The two people involved in these extracts have known each other for over 15 years and both have strong ties to the same local community, where they have each occupied a range of social roles and categories at various times.<sup>49</sup> Their relationship is complex and multifaceted, and at the time this session took place they could have defined that relationship in several different ways: For example, choosing to 'see' themselves as *friends*, *locals*, or *martial-artists* would emphasize membership in a common category and solidarity within a shared social network; however, if they chose to highlight salient differences instead, they could just as easily frame their interaction in terms of specific social roles and power relations, such as (karate) *instructor & student*, *clinical practitioner & academic researcher*, or *therapist &*

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<sup>49</sup> I am aware of all this background knowledge because I am the patient in these extracts.

*patient*.<sup>50</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will refer primarily to the ‘therapist’ or ‘hypnotherapist’ [= H in the transcript] and the ‘patient’ or ‘subject’ [= X].

Since this encounter took place in the living room of the therapist’s home, which also happens to be directly beneath the dojo (i.e. martial arts training hall), the context itself could be considered a source of ambiguity, and because it involved a new activity (hypnotherapy) in a familiar environment (a friend’s living room) the relevant roles were unclear and actively negotiated in interaction. Rather than seeking therapy for a specific problem, the subject was primarily interested in understanding and experiencing the process of hypnosis, so he was asked to come up with a list of questions or topics as ‘potential starting points.’ Video recording is standard practice for this particular hypnotherapist, and the camera was turned on shortly after arrival; however, only the subject appears on screen. The first 30 minutes of the tape are essentially a conversation *about* hypnosis rather than an active hypnotic induction, but the reference to ‘pre-hypnosis’ (below) implies that the therapy session may have already started. The next few examples demonstrate how these two individuals were able to adjust their relative roles in interaction and negotiate a shared perspective on the situation. During this conversation H asks for clarification about various topics introduced by X, and initially it is unclear whether he is asking these questions *as a friend* or *as a therapist*.

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<sup>50</sup> These are not just pairs of categories from the same (generalized) collections; they reflect the individuals’ relative social roles within a system they are both actively involved in. Categories refer to membership in abstract groups (such as ‘karate instructors’ or ‘karate students,’ which are categories within a generalized ‘martial arts’ collection), whereas roles reflect specific relationships, so X is not just any student or any patient, but a student *of this* instructor, and a patient *of this* therapist.



PRE-HYPNOSIS

- X: um.. well, another potential starting point was was the idea of healing  
H: mm, hmm...
- X: um.. on a physical or energetic level just, wholeness and accepting **my** current condition but... in in, as a whole. Accepting where I'm at, **but** uh...
- H: What is your current condition?
- X: Well, I think it's... I wasn't, y'know focussing specifically on a specific problem, but that idea of accepting //the way it is...//  
H: // But they're your, but they're your //=  
H: But they're your words.  
X: yeah
- H: So how do you perceive your current condition? This is what I **do**. It's a, as a pre-hypnosis you set up a pre-hypnosis for me so it's wonderful. **!! laughter !!**
- X: oh, ok.. **!! laughter !!**
- H: It's ok, these are the things that I would've normally asked anyway, so it's wond... it's great.  
X: oh, **!! laughter !!**

(Hypno video)

In the first line H is explicitly directing their discourse by selecting certain topics for elaboration and clarification; however, X continues to frame the topic as a “*potential* starting point,” which reflects his personal interpretation of the situation – they haven't actually ‘started’ the session yet; they are still just talking *about* it. Meanwhile, H has begun asking questions *as a* therapist and is pushing for more precise and personal answers. There seems to be an attempt to pull X out of the past (“I wasn't...”) and into the present: “So how do you perceive your current condition?” (i.e. *now*). In order to facilitate this transition and clarify the context, H explicitly reframes their dialogue as “pre-hypnosis” – and yet, there is also an apparent role-switch from ‘therapist’ to ‘clinical practitioner’ (or something similar) that momentarily allows him to address X as a ‘researcher’ rather than ‘patient’ and comment on the *process* of hypnotherapy in general: “This is what I do... these are the things that I would've normally asked anyway.” This can also be seen as an attempt to put the patient more at ease by suggesting that these probing questions are a perfectly *normal* part of the process and, despite the momentary confusion or ambiguity, everything is ok and still proceeding according to plan.

Although reframing the situation as ‘pre-hypnosis’ establishes a working definition of the situation, their roles continue to be negotiated during that activity as X alternates between answering questions as a ‘patient’ and asking questions as a ‘researcher.’ In the following extract X also demonstrates his (commonsense) understanding that, although based on language and interaction, ‘hypnosis’ is somehow *different* from ordinary conversation – it’s something they will be doing later – and explicitly frames his question as ‘research-related’:

THE RESEARCHER ROLE & PERSONAL OPINION

*During the pre-hypnosis conversation:*

X: in reflecting on the whole idea of hypnosis, and what we were going to be doing, um... some things that I thought about were, um also relating to my research on sort of limitations // and how it might relate, to hypnosis...

H: mm-hmm

X: I was thinking about the distinction between psychological limitations

H: ok

X: = and physical limitations, and down here in the questions I’m not even, I’m not even sure if that, if there *is* a distinction, but... y’know..

H: I, I suh’spo, I suppose you could, work that as a distinction, but.. I, I personally don’t believe that, they’re so interconnected that it’s, y’ you can divide them and look at it one way, you can divide them and look at it the other but they are going to be one and the same...

X: mm..

H: ...personally.

X: yeah.

(Hypno video)

So rather than remaining in a ‘patient’ role, in this extract X explicitly reframes their discussion in terms of research in order to ask a more abstract and theoretical question, which momentarily puts ‘therapy’ on hold. (“Down here in the questions” refers to a piece of paper he’s holding with various questions prepared in advance.) H collaborates in the frame-shift by acknowledging the reference to research with “mm-hmm,” and then clarifies his own discourse role in order to provide his *personal* opinion in response to the question. Although his category membership *as a* hypnotherapist is still relevant, he explicitly deactivates the potential discourse role of ‘spokesperson’ (temporarily) to indicate that he is not speaking on behalf of other professionals in his field. “Personally” occurs both at the beginning and the end of



H's final turn in this extract, effectively framing this segment as 'opinion' and emphasizing the relevance of a narrowly defined discourse role, which is acknowledged by X with the back-channel "yeah."

During pre-hypnosis X continues to ask research related questions about the nature of hypnosis and the distinction between (genuinely) heightened sense perception and imagination; however, rather than relying on context-based authority or 'expert' knowledge, H chooses to frame his responses in terms of *personal beliefs* or *opinion*, and highlights the limits of his own understanding by admitting "I don't know."

H: I, I believe that you, personally I believe that other people have a sense of, uh... intuition.. that they explore uh, on various levels throughout their day or else y'know, at the spur of the moment you decide to go here, you decide to go there... what happens during that time? ...I don't know.

(Hypno video)

This strategy seems to help establish or enhance a shared sense of mystery or possibility and puts H and X on an equal footing in relation to some of these deeper issues and questions. However, the emphasis on personal opinion is also noteworthy because in other contexts I have noticed that facilitators often exploit (the perception of) 'expert' knowledge/roles in order to make influential knowledge claims about the nature of reality. In other parts of the 'pre-hypnosis' dialogue H explicitly responds *as a therapist* (framing his perspective in terms of a specific social role), and he seems to activate the discourse role of spokesperson at another point by speaking in the plural about what 'we' (as professional hypnotherapists) are trying to get you to do during hypnosis.

#### MY PRIORITY AS A THERAPIST

*Two separate extracts from the same pre-hypnosis conversation:*

H: That's all, that's, y'know that's my priority, as a therapist is to, allow somebody to go to a place where they can either identify or, and/or create change, for their well-being.

---[cut]---

H: What, because what we're really trying to get you to do is focus on, on you and to be in-tune with you.

(Hypno video)

On the other hand, rather than acting as a spokesperson on behalf of hypnotherapists in general, it could also be argued that this is an inclusive we, which frames hypnotherapy as a *collaborative* process between the patient and therapist. What the preceding examples demonstrate is the active negotiation of context, category membership, and social/discourse roles in interaction. The framing that occurs throughout ‘pre-hypnosis’ allows the patient and therapist to gradually converge on a shared understanding of the situation and activity they are engaged in.

### **Establishing shared expectations**

Next the therapist begins to frame hypnosis in terms of the ‘conscious’ and ‘sub-conscious’ mind and characterize it as a deeply relaxed and highly suggestible state. The sub-conscious mind is allowed to ‘float to the surface’ and (metaphorically) associated with a *deeper* knowing of your greater well being. Meanwhile, the activity of the conscious mind is framed as a source of superficial interference that can ‘pull you in and out’ of that special state.

### THE CONSCIOUS & SUB-CONSCIOUS MIND

*Two separate extracts from the same pre-hypnosis conversation:*

H: I believe what this does, is allows that sub-consc, hypno, hypnosis will allow that sub-conscious part of you that has that.. deeper knowing of your.. greater well being.. to be... float, to be able to float to the surface so that the conscious mind doesn’t interfere and, sort of, critique everything that’s going on in and around you.

---[cut]---

H: ...that’ll sort of pull you in and out of that hypnotic state, or or that deeply relaxed state, ‘cause that’s all hypnosis is. It’s a heightened sense of relaxation. Different than meditation. Not much different, but different. Different brain-wave patterns than meditation in hypnosis, and uh... and uh.. a highly suggestible state.

(Hypno video)

From this point onwards H continues to speak *as a* ‘professional hypnotherapist’ and draws on (the perception of) specialized training and ‘expert’ knowledge in order to frame the (upcoming) experience of hypnosis in order to set up (positive) expectations and facilitate a certain kind of experience. His claims about brainwave patterns and states of consciousness are accepted without proof or challenge in this context due to implicit assumptions based on his category membership and professional qualifications. Together, through discourse, the patient and therapist



gradually negotiate a shared understanding that although hypnosis has been described *in terms of* sleep, it is a distinctly different state than sleeping, dreaming, or meditation:

DESCRIBED IN TERMS OF SLEEP

*Continuation of the previous extract:*

X: and different than dreaming as well?

H: Different than dreaming as well. Yes. So it's, hypnosis is linked to a sleep state, uh, just through wording originally, when it was developed, hypnosis was, basically talking as uh, in regards to sleep basically. Poor word choice when it was originally used, y'know when the, when the process was originally laid out, 'cause it looks very much like a sleep state. Y'know, people look like they're, once their eyes close, deeply relaxed and in a peaceful sleep.

X: So it was described in terms of sleep, //although it's... //

H: // In terms of sleep //

H: Although there, in hypnosis you will be *more* aware than you, ..than you.. can be in your conscious mind. ...The difference being that, it'll be a specific awareness.

X: ok

(Hypno video).

In the same way strategic framing allowed facilitators to change participants' perception of intimidating activities such as abseiling or rock-climbing, H is leading X to a particular interpretation and understanding of the activity they are about to engage in: "You will be *more* aware than you can be in your conscious mind." This implies that the conscious mind imposes *limitations* on our natural state of awareness, and the therapist goes on to suggest that the conscious mind can resist or block the process of hypnosis.

FOLLOWING VS. BLOCKING THE PROCESS

*During the pre-hypnosis conversation:*

H: It's following the process, that will allow you, to experience the process. If,

X: ok

H: If your conscious mind says, oh yeah, well, y'know that's, I don't agree with this or I don't... so I'm not going to do that part, but I'm gonna do... this.

X: mm-hmm

H: That'll *block* the process. But if your sub-conscious mind says, ok, maybe I can't do it that way but I can do it *this* way, and you still follow the process but, y'know you do it in your own format, that's, that's a workable thing. But re, but refusal to work is a personal barrier.

X: Right.

(Hypno video)

Note that both the conscious and sub-conscious mind have been externalized and personified to a certain extent – they each have their own opinion, knowledge/awareness, and voice – and through framing the patient is subtly encouraged to *self-identify* with the (perspective attributed to the) sub-conscious mind. The sub-conscious is *more* aware, a *deeper* source of awareness, and implicitly associated with the flexibility, adaptability, and 'open-mindedness' that make this process possible.

Presumably the patient *wants* to be hypnotized, but may still be apprehensive about 'losing control.' The therapist implicitly addresses these concerns by acknowledging that the process can be consciously 'blocked,' which may provide some reassurance that the patient retains control and agency, yet simultaneously frames that conscious awareness or assessment as undesirable *interference* or a *refusal to work*. Similar to other forms of empowerment, there is a strong emphasis on personal choice and voluntary compliance. The subject is said to be 'in control' of the session; nevertheless, there is also a powerful presupposition that any 'resistance' encountered due to *personal barriers* can (and should) be overcome. In order to enhance the perception of patient control, the role of the hypnotist in the session is explicitly reframed in the following extract, once again setting up shared expectations of a fundamentally collaborative process.

#### GUIDING VS. CONTROLLING THE SESSION

*Two separate extracts from the pre-hypnosis conversation:*

H: And that's what we *will* be doing in hypnosis. I'll be, I'll be guiding you in ways, and showing you a stepping process, first to relax your physical body, and then I'll show you a stepping process and how to relax your mental mind, so that it works down into a place that we consider to be in a state of hypnosis.

---[cut]---

H: I'll *guide* the session. Who will control the session? You will *control* the session. ...I only take the session where you go with it. Ok?

(Hypno video)



The 'pre-hypnosis' conversation ends shortly after this, and the transition into a formal process of hypnotic induction is distinctly marked in both discourse and interaction. First there are explicit references to certain things being done "before we start," followed by a short break to use the toilet and one final bit of 'pre-hypnosis' dialogue. The start of the induction itself is preceded by 12 seconds of silence and begins with specific verbal instructions that put X into an ideal physical position for deep relaxation:

THE TRANSITION FROM 'PRE-HYPNOSIS' INTO AN INDUCTION PROCEDURE

X: so.. could I uh, go to the washroom?

H: oh, you gotta go to the washroom and so do I before we start.

---[cut]---

*[12 seconds of silence ~ rustling papers etc.]*

H: Uh... I'll just get you to straighten out both feet, and your legs. Mm-hmm, you can get your body nice and, straight and comfortable as you can be there. Just relax your hands on your lap. ..Ok, uncross your fingers... (5 sec.) Lay them flat on your thighs. Ok.

(Hypno video)

This is clearly the end of the 'pre-hypnosis' conversation. The instructions given by H regarding body position only 'make sense' within a specific interpretive frame that defines the relationship between H and X in terms of (hypno)therapist and patient. The voluntary compliance of X supports this interpretation, and in fact, facilitates the successful transition into these roles, which are continuously sustained over the next hour and forty minutes. For the remainder of the session the therapist gives detailed instructions, asks questions, and skilfully leads the patient through a vivid mental/internal experience. X asks a few questions for clarification in the first five minutes, but then ceases to initiate dialogue or offer information and simply sits there, with eyes closed, listening in silence and speaking only in response to direct questions from H.

**Authority in an 'altered' state of consciousness**

Similar to the context-based authority that allows the Conway Centre staff to change participants' perception of the safety equipment through powerfully suggestive

statements that are not necessarily true,<sup>51</sup> in this state of relaxation various claims made by the hypnotherapist are also accepted without challenge, for example, the ‘fact’ that the eyelids are the smallest muscle group in the body and therefore the most easily relaxed:

THE SMALLEST AND THEREFORE MOST EASILY RELAXED

*During guided relaxation:*

H: That’s right.... And as the eyebrows are relaxed, imagine that there’s a tiny little drop of water on each one of your eyelids... and the eyelids are the smallest muscle groups of your body ..and therefore the most easily relaxed... And as the eyes relax, imagine there’s a little drop of water washing over your eyelids, ..right out onto your eyelashes, and as it gets ready to drop off of your eyelashes, it’ll drop down and another physical site, a state of relaxation... and just allow, that... drop of water... just allow it and want it to drop off right now; it’ll drift down, allowing yourself to drift down into a deeper state of relaxation in your face ..and around your forehead... and do that now...

(Hypno video)

In one sense the (mental) activities involved in hypnosis are internal and imaginary; however, the session itself is firmly rooted in a shared sense of reality. The patient is not (intentionally) *pretending* to be hypnotized – the relevant roles and power relations are *real*, and the ‘altered state of consciousness’ is framed (and therefore experienced) as *real*. Although the subject implicitly collaborates in the creation of this deeply relaxed and highly suggestible state, through discourse the hypnotherapist directs the entire session. The most important point to highlight here is that, regardless of whether the content is ‘true’ or ‘realistic,’ the patient responds to these suggestions based on *an implicit assumption of possibility*. The instructions are not questioned or challenged on the basis of plausibility or the patient’s personal beliefs about reality and to the extent that the therapist’s instructions are understood they are *acted upon*.

Although originally introduced in relation to outdoor education at the Conway Centre, this section has shown that many features of framing, strategic role-shifting, and the negotiation of a shared perspective or interpretation also apply to interaction

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<sup>51</sup> For example: “This isn’t just one rope, it’s actually ten ropes woven into one – and *each* of those little ropes inside could support a whole family in a Ford Fiesta, just on its own” (Conway Centre field notes).



during clinical hypnotherapy. By highlighting similarities across contexts I hope to demonstrate how discourse affects empowerment in a range of different situations and emphasize the potential power of framing to effectively challenge people's perception of (im)possibility in interaction.

Outdoor activities like abseiling might be intimidating for some people, but they are clearly *possible*, and hypnotherapy involves an internal (mental/physical) process which most people can experience if they choose to follow along; however, my next set of examples deals with an activity that fundamentally contradicts many people's commonsense beliefs about flesh and fire – *firewalking* – relatively ordinary people walking barefoot across red-hot coals, in most cases without experiencing any pain, burning, or physical damage to their feet.

### *Firewalking*

Despite our deeply held beliefs about fire and flesh, *firewalking is possible*. “As a rite of purification, healing, initiation, and devotion, it has long been a thread in the cultural tapestry of countries worldwide. And most recently, of course, it has surfaced in [North America and Western Europe] as a ritual of empowerment” (Sternfield 1992: 65). According to promotional material and former participants, “it serves as an unforgettable demonstration of human potential” (Quantum Leaps Lodge website), “and for almost everyone who attempts it, even those who are burned, the firewalk seems to be a truly powerful, even transforming, experience” (Sternfield 1992: 17). This section focuses specifically on (re)framing this activity as a ‘realistic’ option, and the change in perspective that takes place during a firewalking seminar that allows people to move beyond their fears, doubts, and commonsense beliefs to actually *do* something they previously considered ‘impossible.’

Simply saying it's possible, or even demonstrating, often isn't enough to get someone to walk barefoot onto a bed of burning embers because our commonsense beliefs are based on well-established ‘knowledge’ and previous personal experience. Self-categorization and the interpretation of context affect the way people ‘make sense’ of firewalking and their personal understanding of *why* it's possible and what

*kind(s)* of people can do it (as discussed in the previous chapter). Based on data from various firewalking workshops in Canada, the UK, and the USA, this section demonstrates how effective framing can be used to deconstruct or modify personal belief systems in interaction and influence perception or interpretation in ways that allow walking barefoot across a glowing coal-bed to become a safe, natural, and positive personal choice.<sup>52</sup>

### **Creating anticipation & constructive anxiety**

From the very beginning this activity, like all the others discussed in this chapter, is framed in terms of the ‘real’ world, and the ‘fact’ that we all inhabit the *same* world is presupposed. People who walk during these workshops do so on a *real* fire, often built with their own hands; they experience the intense heat as it burns down into a pile of glowing embers and intentionally choose to walk the length of the coal-bed barefoot. It’s important for participants to take the activity seriously because severely burning their feet is still a very *real* possibility, and every source I’ve consulted includes an explicit disclaimer to that effect:

#### IF YOU PLAY WITH FIRE

*Waiver from a firewalking workshop in the USA with Tony Robbins:*

If I do choose to walk on the coals I am fully aware that there are no guarantees regarding my safe passage and that there is a possibility that I may, in fact, receive severe burns to my feet requiring medical attention.

(Sternfield 1992: 25)

Admittedly, there is a strong presupposition and implicit expectation that you *will* be able to walk safely. These are, after all, *fire-walking* workshops not facilitated foot-burning sessions. Nevertheless, it’s important to understand that these warnings are more than a mere liability concern on the part of the organizers. Tolly Burkan, considered by some to be the ‘father of American firewalking,’ originally introduced firewalking into his ‘human potential’ seminars without any kind of disclaimer because he genuinely believed that people couldn’t get burned, however:

The stark realization that I was playing with fire sobered me. The man who was burned in my class appeared to do everything in just the same manner as everyone else in his group and the same as everyone who had ever walked

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<sup>52</sup> Obviously, language can also be used negatively to bring about the same behaviour – through threats, coercion, intimidation, etc. – although the physical and psychological consequences are likely to be much more severe.



with me before. Yet both his soles were extensively blistered, with some of the skin receiving third-degree burns...

...After several thousand people had firewalked successfully at my seminars, another person got seriously burned. The second person burned much worse than the first, with skin badly charred on both feet. She was hospitalized for two weeks.

(Tolly Burkan, in Sternfield 1992: 45)

Although everyone signed waivers at the workshop I attended, few actually took the time to read them. The commonsense reality that *fire burns* was openly acknowledged, but there was still no safety or first-aid equipment in sight, and rather than focussing on the danger to our feet the emphasis was on possibility, personal choice, and initiating a powerful change in perspective. Participation in all the firewalking workshops I have examined is strictly voluntary and, similar to the point made earlier about real vs. perceived risk, few people would choose to participate unless they had been led to believe it was (relatively) safe.

### **Creating a 'safe' context**

Facilitators are in a powerful social position and their authority in this context is based on (the perception of) specialized knowledge and previous experience, which gives them a privileged perspective relative to participants. Although they acknowledge the (real) risk of being burned, they strategically use framing to create the perception of a specialized context that makes it seem highly unlikely:<sup>53</sup>

#### *Q: Will I get burned?*

Getting burned is not part of the seminar program. Terri Ann and Nick have developed a unique program to create the very precise circumstances where participants can walk safely. Nathan our other firewalk instructor constructs and tends to the fire to provide ideal conditions for walking. Given that you are not under the influence of alcohol or other drugs affecting the functioning of your nervous system, and given that you follow instructions, there is very little probability of your getting burned. The seminar is designed to inform you and to empower you – so that you KNOW how to walk safely.

(Mental Combat website)

The extract above is quoted from a website for *Mental Combat*, an organization that leads firewalking seminars in the United Kingdom. In a sense, this kind of

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<sup>53</sup> Much of this strategic framing occurs *before* the actual workshop, for example, in online promotional material designed to make potential participants feel safe enough to even *consider* walking on fire. Creating a specialized sense of context also justifies charging/paying relatively large sums of money for 'expert' facilitation.

promotional discourse, which implicitly addresses potential participants' fears and frequently asked questions, serves a similar function to 'pre-hypnosis' – putting participants at ease and setting up positive expectations for the (new or unfamiliar) activity ahead. By framing firewalking in terms of “ideal conditions” and “the very precise circumstances where participants can walk safely,” these facilitators are beginning to *create* a context in which the possibility of safely walking on fire ‘makes sense.’ The extract below, from a video provided by *UK Firewalk*, shows how the risk of burning is minimized through discourse during an actual seminar with Scott Bell:

HOT SPOTS, BLISTERS, & BURNS

*Firewalking seminar conducted in a classroom:*

There's different types of burns. The most common one is what we call a hot-spot: when you walk across you think, 'there's a little nip there, but it didn't feel too bad, it's fine.' You look at your feet, and you think there's nothing there, no blisters or anything, and it feels warm probably throughout the night, and when you get up in the morning and you look at your feet there's nothing there, it's just a hot spot. It's just somewhere that feels a little bit warm on the night.

Next there comes a blister, you've probably had blisters if you put new shoes on. You can get blisters from new shoes just like you can from firewalking. But they tend to be {unclear} because you might get a little bit of coal stuck in there, so make sure when you get off, just give those feet a good rub and you should be fine.

Going on from there, you could have 2<sup>nd</sup> degree burns, 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns – but we don't allow those {in the UK}, we won't have any of that. And you'll be glad to know that, from my firewalks, we've never had anyone with worse than a blister – apart from me, who got a few blisters doing the world record, but that's {??} breaking world records.

(Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video)

The speaker in this extract is Scott Bell, professional firewalk facilitator and current Guinness World Record holder for the greatest firewalking distance. He has actually broken the world record *twice*: first by walking 250 feet on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006 (and burning his feet), then by walking 328 feet (100 metres) on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006. According to the UK Firewalk website, on his second attempt the temperature of the embers was an average of 560° Celsius; however, “Scott was totally unharmed and had no signs of any burns” (UK Firewalk website).



In his seminar he clearly acknowledges the possibility of burning, but frames it in a way that makes it seem like a slight inconvenience rather than a valid reason not to stick your feet in a fire: ‘hot-spots’ are nothing – “just a little nip,” but they don’t feel too bad. It’s fine – “you can get blisters from new shoes just like you can from firewalking,” but that doesn’t stop us from buying new shoes. It’s implied that 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns are only a serious concern if you’re planning to break a world record, and besides, they’re *not allowed* so “we won’t have any of that.” Just like empowerment in other contexts, firewalk facilitators exploit their ‘expert’ power and context-based authority to challenge other people’s commonsense assumptions; however, the activity is still grounded in the *real* world, with *real* risks, so connecting this new possibility to participants’ previous experience and background knowledge is an important part of the sense-making process.

Walking the coals is no decision to be taken lightly, for one of the basic tenets of our reality is: fire burns! And to bring something this basic, this self-evident, into question raises questions about all of reality, [which] can be almost as unsettling as getting burned.

(Sternfield 1992: 17)

### **Summary**

This chapter has focussed on framing and the creation of context in interaction, including the active negotiation of relevant social roles and categories. Framing affects the way people ‘make sense’ of their personal experience and can be treated as a cognitive or communicative process (Agne 2007: 553); however, through the analysis of language and interaction I have tried to highlight the interpersonal aspects of interpretation and demonstrate that facilitators can have a tremendous influence on how their participants see the world. I have suggested that participants and facilitators are aware of multiple realities, in the sense of overlapping and equally valid interpretive frames, and shown how their interaction reflects different definitions of ‘what is going on’ as well as the ability to initiate strategic frame-shifts that serve their communicative and social goals. In experiential education, hypnotherapy, and firewalking, the facilitators and participants often have fundamentally different perspectives on the situation or activity that has brought them together, which makes the relevance of certain roles, categories, and contextual details more ambiguous and negotiable. The examples discussed in this chapter demonstrate how facilitators can exploit their context-based authority and expertise

to enhance the perception of risk or safety, challenge commonsense assumptions, and establish shared expectations that influence participants' experiences and behaviour. I have also shown how redefining the purpose of an activity can affect participants' willingness to participate and influence the subjective interpretation of success. Furthermore, since the facilitators cannot force people to engage in these challenging activities against their will, I have argued that changing the way participants see the situation or themselves is often essential in order to convince them to step outside their 'comfort zone' in search of new possibilities.

In this chapter I have deliberately drawn on examples that presuppose or rely upon a shared sense of 'objective' reality in order to highlight how facilitators can exploit their unique social position and (the perception of) previous experience or expert knowledge to influence participants' understanding of the *real* world. In the next chapter I discuss conceptual blending and the value of leading people to engage in various *imaginary* realities – worlds created and collaboratively sustained entirely through discourse and interaction.





## Conceptual Blending & Imaginary Realities

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as  
six impossible things before breakfast.

~ Lewis Carroll <sup>54</sup>

### **Introduction**

Building on the previous discussion of framing and the negotiation of context, this chapter examines *imaginary* realities that are created and sustained through discourse and interaction. Drawing on examples from outdoor/experiential education, hypnotherapy, and firewalking, I demonstrate how mutual engagement in imaginary scenarios affects empowerment across contexts. Once again, the emphasis is on creating a shared perspective and changing the way participants 'see' the world; however, in these examples the facilitators are not offering insight into aspects of the *real* world – instead they deliberately create an alternative world through language and convince participants to (inter)act *as if it were real*. Although these worlds or scenarios are understood to be artificial and 'unrealistic' by everyone involved, through collaborative reinforcement they become 'real' enough to (temporarily) change participants' perspectives, affect their immediate behaviour, and potentially provide a useful experience that can lead to lasting change or empowerment.

In the previous chapter I discussed 'multiple realities' in terms of 'frames-within-frames' – for example, at the Conway Centre (most) participants are on an organized school trip, which is essentially an *event* that involves various specialized activities, creating a background *educational* interpretive frame with multiple *task* frames embedded within it. The same kind of analysis can be applied to the other data sets as well; the hypnotherapy session and firewalking seminar could each be understood as a distinct event with several other structured activities taking place within it. This chapter has a slightly different focus – it examines individual activities that involve imaginary realities and/or blended mental spaces. Although the real world is never forgotten or abandoned entirely, in order to fully engage in these activities participants must (temporarily) adopt a particular perspective, grounded in an 'unrealistic' scenario, and behave *as if* certain things were true.

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<sup>54</sup> *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), chapter 4.



## Theoretical Background

### Simulated activities

Many of the activities discussed in this chapter, particularly the problem-solving activities from the Conway Centre, are similar to the *simulated activities* described by Linell and Thunqvist (2003: 413), “activities that are not quite real, genuine, authentic, or fully being what they pretend to be.” Through an analysis of talk-in-interaction during simulated job interviews on a Swedish youth project, they examine competing framings *within* a single activity to show how people orient to several goals simultaneously and deal with the ambiguity that arises when there are multiple definitions of ‘what is going on’ in interaction (Linell & Thunqvist 2003: 409; cf. Goffman 1974). The participants are engaged in one activity, within a clearly defined context, while trying to collaboratively simulate another activity at the same time.

My own analysis also demonstrates interactive participation in the development of artificial scenarios; however, there are differences in application that make these activities more like *play* than (serious) *role-play* – for example, the specific educational objectives are only indirectly linked to the details of the simulated activity, which often makes the scenario itself much more imaginative.<sup>55</sup> Although ‘play’ can take a variety of forms, my focus here is on ‘pretend play’ or play in which participants imaginatively transform objects, other people, and themselves into something or someone else (DeHart 1996). According to Ladegaard (2004: 2008), pretend play often includes utterances that set the scene, negotiate roles, and redefine the context or refer to pretend scenarios. In addition, playful talk, or talk *as* play, is essentially collaborative and “a key function of playful talk is the creation and maintenance of group solidarity” (Coates 2007: 29).

### Imagination, interaction, & play frames

In his “Theory of Play and Fantasy” Bateson ([1972] 2000: 177-193) discusses certain kinds of animal and human behaviour in terms of a ‘play frame’ and suggests that “the evolution of play may have been an important step in the evolution of

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<sup>55</sup> Simulated job interviews are meant to develop useful skills and shared expectations that apply to *real* job interviews; however, pretending to be on a sinking pirate ship is not about becoming a better pirate. The leadership, cooperation, communication, and problem-solving skills that are being taught are only indirectly related to the imaginative details of the task itself.

communication” (Bateson 2000: 181). He argues that establishing a play frame, (and perhaps interactional framing in general), is a form of *metacommunication* because it essentially instructs participants to modify their interpretation and understanding of subsequent linguistic and behavioural cues. Bateson then goes on to point out “two peculiarities of play: (a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent” (Bateson 2000: 183).

According to Chafe (2001: 42), play is fundamentally *non-consequential* in the sense that it fails to affect people’s lives in a ‘serious’ way; and others have pointed out that play, as observed in a variety of mammals, serves to rehearse and exercise skills in a safe environment, and may induce a particularly powerful mind state for adult learning – although some adults may require *permission* to play (Beard & Wilson 2006: 137-138).

Building on Bateson’s work, Coates argues that people actively frame their discourse and behaviour as ‘serious’ or ‘play’ in interaction, and competent speakers can switch from serious to playful modes at any time; however, in order to sustain a play frame the people involved must recognize the switch and choose to maintain that orientation or perspective (Coates 2007: 32-33). Successful collaboration relies on shared understandings and the negotiation of a shared perspective (Coates 2007: 46), which is why participants’ pragmatic competence and the context of the play situation need to be seriously considered (Ladegaard 2004: 2016; cf. Sheldon 1996; Ervin-Tripp 2001). According to Coates, establishing and sustaining a coherent (play) frame requires more than mere ‘cooperation’ in the sense intended by Grice (1975), since “the conversational floor is potentially open to all participants simultaneously” (Coates 2007: 39). Interacting in a ‘play’ frame can be thought of as a *specialised joint activity* (Coates 2007: 46; Davies 2003: 1368), and collaboratively constructed talk of this kind has been described by some in terms of ‘team performance’ (Norrick 2004; cf. Goffman [1971] 1990).

Whether the roles and worlds are ‘real’ or imaginary, to the extent that one is ‘taken seriously’ in interaction, playing or performing *any* social role requires the implicit collaboration of other people (Goffman 1990). In addition, “people’s expectations



about ways of interacting may contribute to their framing of the situation, and their notion of what is going on helps shape their actions and their interpretations of others' actions" (Dornelles & Garcez 2001: 1708). Since this chapter deals specifically with imaginary scenarios, some of the examples provided could potentially be understood and analysed in terms of *frame fabrication* (Goffman 1974); however, the main difference between the interaction I have observed and more traditional concepts of fabrication is the issue of deliberate deception.

Goffman (1974: 83-123) describes fabrication as the intentional effort of one or more individuals to lead others into a false interpretation of 'what is going on' with either benign or exploitative intentions. Fabrication contrasts with ordinary ambiguities and errors that result from so-called 'straight' activity due to accidental misperception or misinterpretation, and Dornelles & Garcez (2001) discuss an interesting example of a situation that is essentially play for one participant, but interpreted as reality by another – a prank phone call. Their analysis demonstrates how the individuals involved collaborate in the construction and maintenance of a fabricated frame, turn by turn, without actually knowing how it will turn out in the end. Several examples in the chapter ahead also demonstrate this kind of dynamic, collaborative, and open-ended reality construction in different contexts.

Although the facilitators in many of my examples are clearly using discourse to lead participants into a partial or false notion of what is going for the purpose of empowerment, an explicitly imaginary scenario is not necessarily deceptive if the people involved are all aware that it is pretend play. Similarly, in the case of something like firewalking, even if the explanation or interpretive frame is inaccurate or unverifiable, the facilitator may truly believe it to be true and have no intention to mislead people; therefore, certain interpretive frames could also be understood as errors in perception, logic, and sense-making, or simply ambiguous alternatives – potential explanations that reflect an honest assertion that *we just don't know* why it works or what 'the truth' is.

### **Metaphors & mental spaces**

Conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson [1980] 2003; [1993] 2007) and mental spaces (Fauconnier 1985) give us another way of talking and thinking about the

world(s) we (seem to) inhabit, and the way we create, sustain, and make sense of them. Both of these theoretical concepts deal with a link between language and thought, or the effects of discourse on conceptual structure, and involve creating (mental) connections between one domain and another or understanding one thing in terms of another. The primary reason mental spaces and conceptual metaphor are relevant to the pragmatics of empowerment is because they offer some insight into the sense-making process and are powerful tools for understanding and influencing other people in social interaction.

According to Lakoff (1999: 159), “it is virtually impossible to think or talk about the mind in any serious way without conceptualizing it metaphorically,” and indeed, the very notion of ‘mental spaces’ is clearly metaphorical. On the other hand, the whole process of creating and interpreting metaphors can be discussed and understood *in terms of* mental spaces and conceptual blending, so these two approaches to analysis are different but not necessarily mutually exclusive and there are good reasons to think of these as complementary rather than competing theories (see Green & Evans 2006: 435; cf. Grady, Oakley, & Coulson [1999] 2007).

#### CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

Metaphors allow us to think (and speak) of one thing in terms of another; however, they are more than just an imaginative linguistic feature or clever turn of phrase – they are fundamentally conceptual. From this perspective, based largely on the early work of Lakoff & Johnson ([1980] 2003; Lakoff [1993] 2007), it is claimed that conceptual metaphors affect how we talk and think, which inevitably affects our attitudes and actions as well (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 39). In fact, metaphors are considered central to our conceptualization of what ‘ideas’ are and what ‘rational thinking’ is or involves (Lakoff 1999: 169-170), and according to Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 159), they “play a central role in the construction of social and political reality.” They help us understand or make sense of (people, actions, and events in) one domain by linking it to another that is generally more familiar and less complex. For example, within ‘classic’ conceptual metaphor theory conventional (English) expressions such as ‘*look how far we’ve come*’ and ‘*we should go our separate ways*’ are said to reflect the underlying conceptual metaphor LIFE (or LOVE) IS A JOURNEY, and the main claim is that people talk this way because they actually



understand (i.e. conceptualize) and think (i.e. reason) about life/relationships in terms of journeys (Zinken 2007: 263).

In the previous chapter I briefly mentioned that the whole idea of ‘framing’ relies on a sense of ‘perspective’ based on the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) also describe a number of (English-based) metaphors that have implications for engaging in practical empowerment in interaction – including, for example, the idea that PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL STATES ARE ENTITIES WITHIN A PERSON, (e.g. *filled with rage, bursting with joy*) which affects not only the way people talk about joy, anger, fear, and so on, but also how they experience, understand, and respond to them as well. The key point is that metaphors, although highly useful, are essentially *imaginary*.<sup>56</sup> Over time they may become conventional and well established, but the connections created between the source and target domains are not ‘real’ just because they make sense, and metaphors only provide a *partial* mapping of features from one thing onto another:

The metaphorical structuring involved here is partial, not total. If it were total, one concept would actually *be* the other, not merely understood in terms of it. ...On the other hand, metaphorical concepts can be extended beyond the range of ordinary literal ways of thinking and talking into the range of what is called figurative. ...So when we say that a concept is structured by a metaphor, we mean that it is partially structured and that it can be extended in some ways but not others.

(Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 13)

As a result, metaphors inevitably *highlight* certain features, roles, and relationships, while simultaneously *hiding* other aspects of reality; nevertheless, they are often extremely influential because we reason and define our reality in terms of conceptual metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of that understanding (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 158, 244). This is why relatively simple changes in discourse can ‘highlight’ new options, reveal ‘hidden’ potential, and help empower people across contexts. Metaphors *are so seamlessly woven into* our ordinary ways of talking and thinking that often we don’t even *notice* them; they become *invisible, veiled* by

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<sup>56</sup> However, *primary metaphors* are said to be grounded in our pre-conceptual embodied experience of the world, so although they are imaginary they are not completely arbitrary (see Grady 2005; Johnson 1987; Grady [1999] 2007).

conventional interpretation and common sense.<sup>57</sup> However, they can also be deliberately developed and strategically employed in interaction to influence interpretation and thereby affect behaviour. “We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphors” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 158).

Since the theoretical concepts of ‘framing,’ ‘blending,’ and ‘mental spaces’ are all essentially metaphorical, by discussing language, thought, and interaction in these terms we inevitably emphasize certain aspects of the sense-making process over others. On some level these may all be part of the same underlying process, which some might call *conceptual integration* (Fauconnier & Turner 2002); however, I still think there is an important distinction between talking about X *in terms of* Y and actually getting people to believe or behave *as if it were true* that X *really is* Y. As far as empowerment is concerned, ways of talking that trigger beneficial changes in thinking are important because they can ultimately lead to powerful personal insights and long-term behavioural change in other contexts.

Language is one of the most versatile and influential ways one mind can affect another in interaction. Words can set up entire worlds full of roles, relationships, and ‘logical’ entailments that gradually become part of the sense-making process – and as we integrate new ideas or perspectives into our conceptual system and worldview they begin to directly affect our experience of the world.

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones.

(Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 145)

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<sup>57</sup> The italicized bits are all based on the underlying metaphors IDEAS ARE THINGS and KNOWING IS SEEING, (see Lakoff 1999: 162).



### MENTAL SPACES

Mental space theory (Fauconnier 1985) is particularly useful because it offers a comprehensive and compelling theory of the entire sense-making process, including the interpretation of metaphor, analogy, and other complex mental models/mappings, which helps explain how language use affects cognition and how conceptual integration can influence behaviour. Mental spaces can be thought of as distinct domains or “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 40). As far as discourse and interaction are concerned, the main idea is that the interpretation of an utterance triggers the creation of a mental representation,<sup>58</sup> which may include salient aspects of the situation, participants, and preceding discourse, etc. Specific mental spaces are built up in working memory and contain certain *elements* (such as people, objects, identities, roles, categories, etc.), from a variety of sources, including previous experience and social background knowledge. According to Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 102), when those elements and relations are organized in a recognizable way we can say that the mental space is *framed* and refer to that underlying structural organization as a ‘frame’; however, the structure of most mental spaces is initially quite vague and can be modified in different ways as thought and discourse unfold (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 40). Multiple layers of mental space, often populated with (some of) the same elements, are structured and interconnected in various ways. Metaphor, analogy, counterfactuals, and the entire process of framing in interaction can all be understood and analysed on a conceptual level in terms of creating a partial cross-space mapping from one domain (or mental space) to another.

Language, then, is not merely interpreted with respect to worlds, models, contexts, situations, and so forth. Rather, it is involved in constructions of its own. It builds up mental spaces, relations between them, and relations between elements within them. To the extent that two of us build up similar space configurations from the same linguistic and pragmatic data, we may “communicate”; communication is a possible corollary of the construction process.

(Fauconnier 1985: 2)

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<sup>58</sup> Following Fauconnier, my use of the term ‘mental representation’ should be interpreted in a weak and general sense: The process of mental space construction involves something happening on some cognitive level; however, the theory itself makes no claims about neurological organization or mental images (Fauconnier 1985: 170).

Mental spaces are considered an essential aspect of language use and interpretation, but they “are not part of the language itself, or of its grammars; they are not hidden levels of linguistic representations” (Fauconnier 1985: 1). According to Fauconnier, “simple construction principles and simple linguistic structures may yield multiple space configurations. And this creates the illusion of structural complexity” (Fauconnier 1985: 2). ‘Triggers’ (in the world or in discourse) are said to set up ‘targets’ in mental space, and any linguistic expression (i.e. use of language) that establishes a new space or refers back to one that has been previously introduced is considered a ‘space-builder’ (Fauconnier 1985: 17). The new space is always established within a parent space, which may be explicit or inferred and is often determined pragmatically (Fauconnier 1985: 171), and different (linguistic) space-builders set up different kinds of mental space: For example, time adverbials (e.g. in 1929, last year, next time) establish a ‘time space’; references to location (e.g. in Canada, on the corner, under the table) produce mental representations of physical or geographic space; and any particular topic can create a ‘domain space’ that activates or incorporates an interconnected area of knowledge. However, regardless of the specific kind of space created, the new space and parent space must be connected in some way that makes sense (Fauconnier 1985: 18). Furthermore, due to their partial structure, specific domains are open to extensive elaboration and can develop a range of complex connections across multiple layers of mental space.

Both Lakoff and Fauconnier suggest that mental spaces are often structured, at least partially, by *idealized cognitive models* – relatively complex and stable knowledge structures that essentially represent theories about the world (Evans & Green 2006: 270; cf. Lakoff 1987; Fauconnier 1985). These theories/models are often established locally or culturally on the basis of personal experience or on general psychological grounds, which “implies possible variation from community to community, from context to context, and from individual to individual” (Fauconnier 1985: 10).

Although two spaces can be connected in multiple ways, the target (or counterpart) in each space is not necessarily identical, which allows us to produce hypothetical spaces that are *based on* ‘reality’ (as a parent space) but not strictly ‘realistic.’ Furthermore, because the connectors between spaces often go in both directions, elements in a purely hypothetical or imaginary mental space can be used to refer



back to real targets and conceptual integration can affect interpretation and behaviour in the *real world*.<sup>59</sup> Mental space theory offers significant insight into the pragmatics of empowerment across contexts because the various facilitators I have observed are all actively using language to create and/or modify specific mental spaces in order to influence participants' interpretation and interaction. Although I do not engage in a detailed analysis of each layer of mental space or illustrate the cross-space mapping of specific elements with abstract diagrams (see Fauconnier & Turner 2002), a basic understanding of mental spaces theory is necessary in order to make sense of my comments on conceptual blending and integrated action, which are the major focus of this chapter.

### CONCEPTUAL BLENDING

Mental spaces affect the interpretation of language, but they are not *in* language – they are in the human mind – and when mental spaces are used to discuss conceptual blending/integration this is an attempt to describe (at least part of) the sense-making process in general. From this theoretical perspective, the way we make sense of language is directly related to the way we make sense of reality, which essentially involves creating meaning from a flood of raw sensory input. Therefore, Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 142) argue that there is no meaning *in* the hollow form of language itself – rather than representing meaning directly, language systematically prompts the construction of meaning within human minds. Within cognitive linguistics language is seen as a limited and limiting system for the expression of thoughts, which facilitates interpersonal communication and social interaction but merely encodes basic instructions for the human conceptual system (in other people) to access or create richer and more elaborate concepts, ideas, and mental images (Evans & Green 2006: 8). This dynamic and highly imaginative capacity to create meaning is what allows us to 'make sense' of interaction in almost any context, and it is directly related to our perception of identity, similarity, and difference (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 5-6, 18).

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<sup>59</sup> Use of the term 'reality' and references to 'real' objects/targets are somewhat complicated in mental spaces theory because cognitive linguists acknowledge that our ideas, beliefs, and uniquely human perceptions of the world are all affected by embodiment, inevitably partial, and potentially inaccurate; therefore, mental space connectors are not linking *real* objects and any insights that emerge within a blend cannot be directly mapped onto the *real* world because whatever we have been calling 'reality' is actually just another mental representation – the individual's mental representation of reality (Fauconnier 1985: 15; cf. Jackendoff 1985: 29).



Framing, analogy, metaphor, grammar, and commonsense reasoning all play a role in this unconscious production of apparently simple recognitions, and they cut across divisions of discipline, age, social level, and degree of expertise. Conceptual integration, which we also call conceptual blending, is another basic mental operation, highly imaginative but crucial to even the simplest kinds of thought.

(Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 18)

Rather than simply connecting mental spaces, conceptual blending refers to an imaginative mental process that draws on various elements from two (or more) distinct source domains and combines them in a unique (blended) space. Blends emerge from *networks* of mental spaces, and the basic model proposed by Fauconnier and Turner ([1998] 2007; cf. 2002) has at least four spaces: two separate input spaces, a generic space based on shared or overlapping features between the two, and a unique and unpredictable blended space based on partial projection from the input spaces plus emergent features that may not exist in either source domain. Although the minimal network is based on these four spaces, a single conceptual integration network can actually have several input spaces and produce multiple blended spaces (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 47).

Building an integration network involves setting up mental spaces, matching across spaces, projecting selectively to a blend, locating shared structures, projecting backward to inputs, recruiting new structure to the inputs or the blend, and running various operations in the blend itself.

(Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 40)

These aspects of the blending process can happen in any order, at any time, and may occur simultaneously. Although areas of overlap in the generic space may provide some structure, there are often features of one mental space that have no counterpart in another. Through selective projection certain elements and relations from each input end up in the blend, and this bare structure, based on partial mappings from the source domains, is efficiently and imaginatively fleshed out through pattern completion as we recognize fragments of familiar interpretive frames and instantly recruit the remaining structure from background knowledge.<sup>60</sup> As a result of composition, completion, and elaboration, new structures often emerge in the blend

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<sup>60</sup> Fauconnier and Turner (2002) distinguish between different types of blend on the basis of where the underlying structure (or 'frame') in the blended space comes from, and how this relates to frames in the original input spaces; however, because this thesis deals primarily with social interaction rather than conceptual structure I have not explained the difference between *simplex*, *mirror*, *single-scope*, and *double-scope* blends or used these terms in the analysis (for a clear summary see Evans & Green 2006: 431).



that do not exist in any of the original input spaces (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 48), and once a blend has been established, continued elaboration allows us to run it as a (mental) simulation and actively explore the dynamics of an imaginary scenario. “Part of the power of blending is that there are always many different possible lines of elaboration, and elaboration can go on indefinitely. We can run the blend as much and as long and in as many alternative directions as we choose” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 49).

Established mental spaces can be modified at any time, and the creative possibilities of blending are effectively unlimited (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 49). The inherent flexibility of a blended mental space allows people to experiment with different perspectives and experience ‘unrealistic’ scenarios by choosing to behave *as if* the blend were real. Since the original source domains remain intact, conceptual blending does not directly alter one’s awareness of ‘reality’; however, conclusions based on a blended space can be mapped back on to the source domains, generating *real* insights from imaginary worlds. Similar to the way that metaphors become conventional and begin to go unnoticed in everyday language and thought, vivid, powerful, or particularly useful blends can also gradually become *entrenched*, giving rise to commonsense conceptual structures shared throughout a community or culture (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 49).

Effective facilitators often transform self-limiting beliefs by creating vivid blends that can be elaborated in empowering ways and mapped back on to participants’ lives in the source domain of the real world. The deliberate manipulation of conceptual integration networks through language and interaction can serve a range of different goals, including: inference, emotional transfer, counterfactual reasoning, identity construction, long-term conceptual change, and integrated action (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 49-50). Blending not only helps participants to see the situation and themselves from a different point of view, but also allows them to modify their reasoning and interpretation based on an imaginary scenario and then project any insights or conclusions into a range of potential future contexts.

In addition, the creation of imaginative blends can facilitate immediate changes in behaviour through *event integration* and *integrated action* (Fauconnier & Turner

2002). For example, Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 21) describe a scenario in which a ski-instructor encouraged his student to pretend he was actually a waiter in a posh French restaurant. The goal was to teach correct posture and balance by having him imagine carrying a tray of champagne and croissants, taking care not to spill them, while *simultaneously* skiing down a snowy slope in a completely different context. The blended mental space draws specific elements from each input, but is not an exact mapping from one context onto the other – “what counts are the direction of gaze, position of the body, and overall motion. The resulting integrated action in skiing is not the simple sum of carrying a tray while moving downhill on skis” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 21). The skier is not simply acting like a waiter, but adopting some of the relevant features (supplied by background knowledge) and adapting them to the physical and environmental conditions of the immediate context. Once the correct behaviour has been fully mapped back into the (real world) source domain of skiing the blend itself can be abandoned. There is a similar example in my own observations involving abseiling, which is discussed later in this chapter.

### **Framing vs. blending**

Although often closely related, framing and blending do not refer to the same thing – framing occurs in discourse and interaction, while blending is a mental process that occurs in an individual’s mind. Framing a situation or event may involve hiding or highlighting certain features or relations through the use of metaphor or by prompting the creation of a blend, but an event can also be framed in terms of shared social background knowledge, legal precedent, previous discourse, etc. (without the use of a blend). Blending refers to a mental process that brings together elements from multiple input domains into a single imaginary mental space for various purposes. Using language to prompt the creation of a blend is just *one way* of framing, and framing is just *one use* of blending.

### **Metaphor, imagination, & reality in experiential education**

In experiential education, the term ‘metaphor’ tends to be used in a broad, generic sense that refers to any ‘mental bridging operation’ that creates an imaginative link between different domains or describes one thing in terms of another (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 139). Metaphorical language or communication is associated with mental imagery, the indirect expression of emotions, identifying the underlying



pattern that connects two things, and creating connections between the known and unknown (Beard & Wilson 2006; Luckner & Nadler 1997). The emphasis is on the creation and transfer of meaning from one context or experience to another, and facilitators are encouraged to notice the metaphors participants use to tell their stories or process an experience and then ‘mirror’ them or elaborate on those metaphors in order to enhance rapport and promote a positive change in perspective (Beard & Wilson 2006; Luckner & Nadler 1997). It is also believed that metaphorical language stimulates the unconscious mind and may help participants make connections more easily (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 44); due to inherent ambiguity, participants will be more motivated to listen, reflect, and try to find (or create) a deeper sense of meaning (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 141) – “in the end they become creators of empowering metaphors, rather than prisoners of outdated images” (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 44).

For some facilitators the activity itself is merely a metaphor for the learning that takes place, and the challenges encountered may be indirectly or explicitly framed as metaphorical representations of real challenges in everyday life.<sup>61</sup> Although the term *metaphor* is widely used in experiential education, I believe *conceptual blending* is a better way to refer to these imaginative ‘mental bridging operations’ because, in addition to simple cross-space mappings that affect understanding, blending theory is also able to account for emergent structure (i.e. elements that were not drawn from any particular input space, but develop in the blend itself) and integrated action that is not based on complete fantasy or hallucination but is not entirely grounded in the real world either.

Imagination is a powerful tool in experiential education, which enables both *retrospective* and *prospective* learning – imagining the past from a new perspective allows people to reframe previous experiences (either positively or negatively) in order to learn meaningful lessons that apply to their present life-situation, and

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<sup>61</sup> Some facilitators understand this in terms of *reverse symbolism* and describe it as the opposite of analogy. For example, when someone says, “Don’t worry, it’s like learning to ride a bike” (implying that once you learn a certain skill you never forget), they are making a point in the present moment by mapping an abstract generalization onto a specific, familiar, and concrete experience. In experiential education, rather than mapping abstract meaning onto a concrete physical experience, facilitators may lead participants to interpret their experience in terms of a specific metaphor in order to create a deeper and more personal sense of meaning, which can then be (metaphorically) applied to other contexts (for more on this see Luckner & Nadler 1997: 142).

imagining alternative futures allows people to evaluate the possibilities of success, develop strategies to overcome potential obstacles, and select an appropriate course of action to achieve their goals (Beard & Wilson 2006: 265-267). Language and imagination are closely linked in the facilitation of many experiential education activities, and the examples in this chapter will illustrate how clever and creative language use can prompt participants to create mental blends that directly affect interpretation and interaction.

According to Beard and Wilson (2006: 135-136), fantasy is both an important form of play and an effective method of framing an activity to enhance the sense of atmosphere, excitement, and adventure. They suggest that “experiential providers might also consider becoming adept at storytelling, as ‘scenarios’ often form the backcloth to experiential activities” (Beard & Wilson 2006: 147), and these imaginary realities may involve anything from sharks, alligators, and poison peanut butter to radioactive bombs, corrosive acid, floods and forest fires (Priest & Rohnke 2000: 5). Some activities are set entirely in a fantasy world, while others involve moving back and forth between alternate realities; however, the notion of ‘reality’ in experiential education is actually quite complex (Beard & Wilson 2006: 129, 136).

What is a ‘real’ experience? Even daydreams and fantasies are inevitably dreamt or imagined in the real world, by real people with physical bodies, social identities, and ‘serious’ beliefs about the way things really are (cf. Goffman 1974: 247). As previously noted, play is often fun but fundamentally inconsequential (Chafe 2001: 42), and the degree to which an activity is perceived as ‘real’ and ‘relevant’ can have a significant effect on learning (Beard & Wilson 2006: 127). Although ‘enhanced realism’ is a priority for many experiential education programmes, what is meant by *realism* in these contexts is actually more intense involvement in the activity or scenario, regardless of whether it’s based on fact or fantasy (Beard & Wilson 2006: 88-89). By teaching real skills through imaginary scenarios, facilitators have the opportunity to engage in ‘reality manipulation’ – deliberately adjusting various dimensions of reality during both real and simulated activities in order to enhance motivation, participation, or perceived risk, etc. Some activities emphasize real risks and consequences, while others focus more on generating real emotions or promoting real trust and teamwork; however, “there are situations where lowering reality



permits a different kind of learning” (Beard & Wilson 2006: 133). For example, fantasy can reduce inhibitions and allow participants to safely explore new identities, roles, and ways of interacting, and can be particularly helpful when radical alternatives need to be considered (Beard & Wilson 2006: 133).

People pretend, imitate, lie, fantasize, deceive, delude, consider alternatives, simulate, make models, and propose hypotheses. Our species has an extraordinary ability to operate mentally on the unreal, and this ability depends on our capacity for advanced conceptual integration.

(Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 217)

The activities discussed in this chapter all deal with aspects of the unreal that directly affect behaviour and interaction in the real world. This section has discussed several areas of linguistic theory that shed light on the pragmatics of empowerment in these contexts – from the issue of multiple goals and alternative framings during simulated activities to implicit collaboration in sustaining a play frame – and the emphasis throughout has been on understanding and interpretation. The sense-making process and creation of meaning have been examined through research on metaphor, mental spaces theory, and conceptual blending, which all influence understanding in interaction and highlight the powerful link between language and conceptualization. Through dynamic and motivated language use, we create and integrate imaginative metaphors and blended mental spaces, often in creative collaboration with other people, which affect who we think we are, the way we interact with the world around us, and the possibilities we perceive. The following examples will demonstrate how skilful language use can facilitate empowerment by prompting the creation of meaningful imaginary scenarios, modifying metaphors or mental spaces, and developing useful blends that lead to integrated action in the present moment and potential long-term behavioural change.

Having established a sufficient base of theoretical background and terminology to meaningfully investigate and analyse the discursive creation of imaginary realities in social interaction, the remainder of this chapter will discuss extracts from my data that illustrate these concepts in relation to empowerment across contexts. The emphasis throughout is on the practical use of fictional worlds, metaphor, and conceptual blending to bring about positive change in the real world by strategically influencing conceptual structure through language and interaction.

## *Experiential Education*

In some situations different yet equally legitimate frames may overlap and interpenetrate without conflict or competition – that is to say, two (or more) distinct activity types may be *in use* as relevant interpretive frames simultaneously. In the previous section I discussed the work done by Linell and Thunqvist (2003) on simulated activities in which participants orient to several goals simultaneously, as well as pretend play (DeHart 1996) and the implicit collaboration involved in sustaining a ‘play frame’ (Bateson 2000; Coates 2007). Through the following analysis I intend to demonstrate similarly complex dynamics during a series of problem-solving activities at an experiential education centre in North Wales. The examples discussed in this chapter also illustrate rapid changes in footing (Goffman 1981) or interactional alignment as a result of frame-shifting, which demonstrate that multiple interpretive frames remain accessible in interaction. Finally, I provide an example of integrated action based on conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) during an outdoor abseiling activity.

### **Problem-solving activities**

The following examples have all been collected through participant-observation with several different groups engaged in the same series of ‘problem-solving activities’ at the Conway Centre, a residential experiential education and outdoor pursuits centre in North Wales. These activities take place outdoors, with minimal equipment, and are explicitly designed to improve trust, teamwork, and ‘communication skills’ within the group. Theoretically they can be attempted in any order; however, some tasks are clearly more challenging than others and staff facilitators will choose particular problems based on their ongoing assessment of each group’s capabilities. Each ‘problem’ involves a task with a clearly defined goal, but staff members can modify those goals in order to change the nature and challenge of the task. Groups that succeed instantly or struggle initially will often do the same task multiple times, but with progressively more challenging goals devised by the facilitator.

The ‘multiple realities’ discussed in the previous chapter – based on the task scenario itself and the background educational frame of a school trip – apply to the Conway Centre data in this chapter as well. During this series of problem-solving activities,



which often take 3-4 hours to complete, each challenge presented to the group is fundamentally a complex simulated activity that creates a duality of context, an awareness of multiple frames, and, in a sense, the simultaneous experience of multiple realities. The main difference with the problem-solving activities is that the challenge and any associated sense of danger or perceived risk is artificial, created through discourse, and based on a collaboratively sustained imaginary scenario. The core action of each task revolves around ‘problems’ or ‘challenges’ that *do not exist* – they can only be thought of as ‘real’ problems in relation to the specific goals and imaginary hazards of the (discursively constructed) reality of the task frame.

The key point of these examples is that participants and facilitators are aware of multiple goals simultaneously – one embedded in the task frame, as well as several broadly educational goals – and their interaction reflects this awareness. Furthermore, I would argue that these two ‘realities’ are fundamentally linked in important and complex ways that contribute to empowerment yet are often overlooked. Specifically, it is the imaginative framing of the task scenario (through discourse) that *creates* the essential conditions for the achievement of ‘real world’ educational goals such as improved leadership, teamwork, and communication skills.

Detailed discursive framing, which may involve the use of metaphor or conceptual blending to promote participation and integrated action, is a key component of effective facilitation because it gives the leader an opportunity to pre-emptively alter participants’ perception of the activity and set up positive expectations for the task ahead, while subtly encouraging group members to modify their own behaviour and adopt (imaginary) roles that support the educational goals of the activity. Different staff members and group dynamics led to vastly different levels of ‘success’ on the various tasks, however defined, and since the goals were often adapted to suit each group it makes little sense to directly compare the performance of one group against another. Instead, this analysis focuses specifically on imaginative framing, conceptual blending, and social collaboration in order to highlight how discourse and pretend play can create a positive and empowering experience that offers insight into communication, cooperation, and group dynamics that participants can then apply in other contexts.

The following examples demonstrate how various staff facilitators at the Conway Centre use language to transform (the perception of) reality for group members engaged in these activities. First, after initial success on their first task of the day, the expectation of increasingly difficult challenges is established in a fun and exciting way by quickly creating a conceptual blend based on the X-box videogame system to frame the entire series of problem-solving activities:

LIFE INSIDE AN X-BOX

*Outdoors with a group of seven participants (11-12 years-old):*

Staff: How many of you guys own an X-box?  
Yeah, or a Playstation, whatever... Uh huh, ...all of you. Ok.  
So what happens, what do you do when you complete one level?

A: fight the big boss!  
B: say *whoo hoo!* and dance around!  
C: save the game?

Staff: right, ok, but then what? You go on to the next level right?  
And it gets more challenging, more difficult as you go on, yeah?  
So that's what we're gonna do this morning. And you've done so well on this one and worked together as a team so I think you're ready for the next level. Let's go!

(Field notes)

By creatively highlighting similarities between the problem-solving activities and a video-game with various levels the facilitator changes participants' perception of the activities they are collaboratively engaged in, which arguably achieves several interactional goals: First of all, it establishes a few shared expectations for the day ahead, and more importantly, it frames the challenges in a *fun* and *positive* way. As students on a school trip they may have different ideas about tasks and goals embedded in the educational frame – some students may enjoy school, but others might have more negative associations attached to that context. The first part of this extract establishes common ground in a distinctly different domain and imaginatively activates that area of shared background knowledge, and saying “so that's what we're gonna do this morning” smoothly maps that domain onto the (real world) problem-solving activities. Videogames typically involve imaginary characters in exciting and challenging scenarios, which makes this a dynamic and adaptable blend; however, unlike ‘serious’ academic tasks at school, failure or poor performance in a videogame does not reflect negatively on the individual as a person because it's



based on a character and world that are not real, which may make participation less (face-) threatening.

The initial cross-space mapping that links the immediate context to an X-box (“or a Playstation, whatever”) is partial and under-specified, but the staff member subtly directs the process of completion and elaboration in the blend. In terms of elements, the participants and tasks of the problem-solving activities are obviously mapped onto the characters and challenges in a multi-player videogame, with a basic structure of ‘levels’ brought in to create a sense of progression from one problem to the next. Additional details are drawn in from participants’ background knowledge to complete the blend; however, through selective projection some features from the source domain are emphasized while others are excluded – for example, participants can try the same task several times, or they may be given a ‘limited number of lives’ to complete the challenge successfully, but they (usually) cannot ‘save’ the game, choose to quit, return to previously conquered ‘levels,’ or decide to play an entirely different game.<sup>62</sup>

Unlike most videogames, there may not be a coherent story or set of characters that clearly links one level to the next; however, this can collaboratively emerge through elaboration as the group/game progresses. The example above merely frames the series of activities as ‘levels’ without specifying the characters or kind of game; however, I have seen facilitators creatively frame the same set of activities in terms of a group of daring knights on an elaborate medieval quest, spies on a secret mission, superheroes, pirates, and several other imaginative scenarios. Some facilitators spend more time on framing than others, and based on my observations I would say there is a direct correlation between effective framing and ‘serious’ participation in the task scenario. Although the blend itself will have to be adapted to suit specific groups, by discursively creating a vivid and appropriate imaginative scenario for each task, facilitators effectively lead participants to interpret their immediate situation in terms of the blend and (ideally) behave as if the goals and hazards of that scenario were real. The next example illustrates the imaginative

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<sup>62</sup> In fact, it often seems more like the facilitators are the ones ‘playing the game’ because they can direct the participants to any ‘level’ they choose, modify the nature of the challenge, and pause or quit the game at will.

framing of a specific task, and subsequent modification of that scenario in order to create additional challenges and take it to the next level.

### THE RIVER

#### *'Objective' context:*

A group of seven participants (5 boys & 2 girls; 11-12 years old) are clustered together on a flat grassy lawn. There are two ropes stretched out on the ground nearby in straight parallel lines approximately 20 feet apart, and a pile of eight small, flat, rectangles of wood, each just big enough for one person to stand on, (= one per person + one extra).

#### *Imaginative framing of the task scenario:*

Staff: Does everybody have a good imagination? Ok, I'm going to ask you to use your imagination now. There's been a big plane crash and we all survived, but we're actually in the middle of a huge jungle and we need to cross this river to get back to safety and civilization. The river is too deep to walk through, and it's full of crocodiles and piranhas, so we don't want anyone to fall in the water. All we have to help us are these little floating stumps.

#### *The next level:*

Staff: Ok, I don't know what happened, but somehow we ended up on the wrong side of the river and we need to get back to the side we just came from. Except now there's been a flood upstream and the current is so strong that it will wash the stumps away if they're in the water when nobody's standing on them.

(Field notes)

In this activity the goal is simply to get the group to cross the gap between ropes without touching the ground, and the educational objective is to develop teamwork and communication skills by coming up with a plan, creating a path using the small blocks of wood, and helping each other balance as they make their way across. That is fine if you actually *care* about the educational goals and want to develop those skills, but if not then there is very little incentive in the real world to take this activity seriously. In the objective context the rules and restrictions are artificial and arbitrary, because obviously the grass between the ropes is just as solid and safe as the grass on either side; however, imaginative framing by the facilitator creates a blended mental space with 'logical' reasons to participate: "we're actually in the middle of a huge jungle and we need to cross this river to get back to safety and civilization" and the river is deep and full of dangerous animals. Once again, there is selective projection into the blend: The participants are all survivors of a plane crash, but with no signs of trauma or injury, and the creatures in the river are dangerous and



deadly, but there is no need to worry about other aspects jungle survival. The two original input spaces are still clearly distinguishable, but participants are operating in a blended space where an ordinary rope is treated as if it were a riverbank and thin, flat, rectangular pieces of wood take on some of the features of floating stumps. These mental spaces can also be modified at any time through discourse in interaction: For example, first ‘safety and civilization’ are on one side of the ‘river’ and then suddenly everybody has to go back because they are on the other side; initially the ‘stumps’ float in the river without moving, but then the flood introduces new dynamics based on the idea of moving water. None of this is *real* – nevertheless, participants adapt their behaviour to the blend and collaboratively sustain that reality through integrated (inter)action. Although the next activity occurs in exactly the same location and is framed in a similar way, in these two examples there is no apparent connection between the imaginative scenario of one task and the next.

#### THE MAGIC CARPET

*Context:* Same group as above, on a grassy lawn with a large sheet of blue plastic.

#### *Imaginative Framing of the task:*

Staff: We’re in the Middle East now, and we’ve bought this lovely flying carpet and we’re cruising along over the desert 200 ft. in the air, so quick, everybody get on the carpet!

There you are, cruising along now. But it turns out we’ve bought a dodgy one. It’s starting to sputter and shake like it’s not going to fly anymore... it’s making all kinds of noises and slowing down like it might fall out of the sky any time... But then, luckily, you remember the wise words of the old man in the shop that sold it to you, he said, “If you have any problems and your carpet won’t fly, just turn it over and it’ll be as good as new!”

There’s just one little problem, at 200 ft. you can’t step off the carpet to turn it over or you’ll fall screaming to your death.

(Field notes)

Although initially introduced and framed by the facilitator, each of these activities relies on the willing participation and implicit collaboration of group members to sustain the ‘reality’ of the task scenario. Obviously, under normal circumstances, nobody loses touch with the reality of the immediate (educational) context entirely. They don’t actually *believe* they’re lost in the jungle or flying over the desert; nevertheless, in some respects they *behave* as if they were. Activities like the magic

carpet ride won't work unless everybody 'gets into it' – collectively adapting their own behaviour to the constraints imposed by the blend and interpreting the actions of others in terms of that reality. For example, if somebody gets too close to the edge participants often shout out sincere and urgent warnings related to the danger of 'falling'; however, the blend does not trigger the same anxiety as a genuine fear of heights. Through partial projection, stepping off the 'carpet' becomes bad and potentially 'dangerous' in the blend, so participants will naturally reach out to 'save' their peers if they lose their balance, which gives them the incentive and opportunity to actually practice *real* communication and cooperation within the blend. However, since the dangers of the desert and jungle have been discursively created for these simulated activities, participants get to enjoy all the benefits of a shared sense of accomplishment without the traumatizing consequences of a real near-death experience.

### **Death & danger in an alternate reality**

Although operating primarily in a blended mental space, the original (educational) context is still an active interpretive frame. In the following example the facilitator immediately begins discussing the group's performance in terms of educational objectives; however, the participant's rapid shift back into the blended reality illustrates Goffman's (1981: 155) observation that people can put their previous alignment and interpretive framework 'on hold' in interaction, allowing them to instantly reactivate it at any time.

#### *YEAH, AND I ALMOST DIED!*

*Immediately following the magic carpet activity:*

Staff: Brilliant! Some of the good things I saw there, communication, lots of encouragement... One thing I'm really impressed with is that you guys are listening to each other and sharing ideas so well. Even not many adults can do that! You had an idea and you listened to each other, communicated and worked out the details so you could work together...

B: Yeah, and I almost died! [*said enthusiastically with a big smile*]  
(Field notes)

Although the staff member's contribution clearly indicates a shift into the educational frame by praising the group for their communication and teamwork skills (rather than flying ability or knowledge of carpet aerodynamics), the participant's



utterance reflects an awareness of both realities: understanding and agreement with the previous comment from an educational perspective (“yeah”), conjoined with a statement that only ‘makes sense’ in relation to the excitement and danger of the – 200 ft. over the desert – task frame (“I almost died!”). In addition, the child’s comment is not interpreted literally but naturally understood by everyone involved in terms of pretend play and the (not so serious) consequences of an imaginary death, which also reflects an implicit awareness of ‘multiple realities’ and how they relate to each other.

Most participants seem to have no difficulty shifting in and out of pretend play and can clearly distinguish between real and imaginary risks; however, in another group I observed at least one moment of genuine anxiety triggered by a ‘bomb’ created through conceptual blending. This particular problem-solving activity involved working together as a team to retrieve a plastic canister from the centre of a large circle of rope. Participants were given various tools to use, (including rope, various pieces of rubber tubing, an old coat hanger, etc.), but were not allowed to step inside the circle. The imaginative scenario used to create the incentive for cooperation and behavioural constraints for this challenge was the idea that this canister was actually a nuclear bomb surrounded by a pool of corrosive toxic waste – if the bomb was not removed from the centre of the circle as soon as possible it would explode, killing millions of innocent people.

*WHAT HAPPENS IF THE BOMB EXPLODES?*

*Question at the beginning of a problem-solving activity:*

F: What happens if the bomb explodes?

Staff: Then everybody dies!

*[seeing the child’s startled look of anxiety, the leader abruptly switches frames]*

Staff: No, c’mon, it’s ok. It’s not real. It’s not *really* radioactive or anything! We’re just pretending.

(Field notes)

Although I cannot confirm the exact age of this participant, her group was made up of primary school students between the ages of nine and ten. Her confusion about the potential consequences of this activity was completely unexpected; however, the

facilitator's utterance supports my interpretation that the girl's fear was genuine: She immediately responded by reassuring the girl that "it's not real – we're just pretending." It may seem obvious to an adult that there would never be a real bomb used in this kind of activity, but in this new and challenging context young participants may genuinely not know what to expect – especially since many of the other activities rely heavily on perceived risk but participant error may still result in serious consequences. In this case, the participant's question 'makes sense' from either perspective, but due to mismatched interpretive frames or background assumptions the facilitator's initial reply suddenly makes this activity much more frightening than originally intended. Although this example may be somewhat amusing to most adults, the potential for this kind of misinterpretation is not confined to interaction with children, and can easily go unnoticed in ordinary conversation unless something draws attention to the mismatched expectations or background assumptions of the people involved.<sup>63</sup>

### **Playing vs. role-play**

Linell and Thunqvist (2003: 413) have suggested that simulated activities might be a special subclass of activities in which more than one thing is going on at once, and within simulated activities I would distinguish between *playing* and *role-play* based on the purpose or (educational) goals of the activity. There are several differences between the problem-solving activities I have observed and more 'serious' simulated activities such as a mock job interview. In a mock interview the purpose is to learn and practise appropriate behaviour in order to prepare for *real* job interviews in the future; however, pretending to be a spy or pirate is (usually) not meant to teach practical piracy and espionage skills. The educational goals of the problem-solving activities are generalized skill sets related to interaction and group dynamics across a range of (real world) contexts, and only minimally tied to the specific details of the task scenario. Although imagination and behavioural adaptation are involved in both, these are not the same *type* of simulated activity at all. More precisely, the structure recruited from background knowledge and imposed on the blend is much more rigid in a mock interview than it is in these imaginative problem-solving activities.

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<sup>63</sup> Although it may not apply to these specific examples, people with Asperger's syndrome and other autistic spectrum disorders may also have difficulty differentiating between pretend play and serious statements/scenarios (Helen Joannidi personal communication).



The beauty of blending is that once a minimal mapping has been made from one domain to another the processes of completion and elaboration are essentially open-ended and unlimited (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 49). I have heard the same ‘challenging’ task of swinging from one slightly raised platform to another by means of a rope – (the ape swing) – introduced to various groups as: pirates swinging from one ship to another over shark-infested seas; Tarzan (and friends) swinging from one tree to another through the jungle on a vine; spies sneaking into an enemy compound to steal sensitive classified material; and superheroes ‘flying’ across the gap between two skyscrapers to save people. In each case the participants seem to have no trouble recruiting enough social background knowledge to instantly and effortlessly complete the blend. Regardless of the scenario chosen and specific hazards or task-oriented goals it entails, the blend creates a shared reality in which the group can practise and develop skills that satisfy the underlying educational objectives. As the next example illustrates, the blend itself doesn’t necessarily have to be internally consistent or shared by all participants in order to be an effective incentive for collaborative integrated action.

*COLLABORATIVE FRAMING OF THE APE SWING SCENARIO*

*Objective context:*

Group of seven participants (3 girls & 4 boys; all age 10). The task requires swinging from one platform to another by a rope. Both platforms are approximately 3-4 feet off the ground, but the second platform has a smaller surface area for the group to stand on.

*Imaginative framing of the task:*

Staff: Is everybody on the box? Can everybody see me? Ok, now you can’t touch the ground, it’s dangerous and deadly! What could it be?

A: Fire!

B: no, lava!

Staff: uh huh...

C: Spikes!

D: Knives!

E: Ants!

Staff: Ants? Yuck...

C: Sharks!

B: Broken glass!

A: Piranhas!

E: Custard!

Staff: Custard?!...

A: no, killer sharks in a sea of custard!<sup>64</sup>

Staff: Ok. So there's spikes and sharks and broken glass and custard...  
Do we want to get in there?

Grp: No!! [multiple speakers; overlapping responses]

Staff: So how are we going to get across?

Grp: With that rope! [overlapping speakers]

(Field notes)

In this extract, rather than imposing an imaginary context, this staff member deliberately involves the group in constructing the “dangerous and deadly” reality of the task scenario. It doesn't matter whether it is fire, spikes, and broken glass, or killer sharks in a sea of custard – the group just needs a clear and ‘logical’ reason to avoid touching the ground. In a sense, the details don't matter, but coherent and consistent framing *does* make a difference. The same constraints on behaviour could theoretically be achieved by introducing arbitrary rules in the educational frame and simply saying, “you're not allowed to touch the ground” – so why bother with all this imaginary reality construction? Framing matters because it fundamentally changes the nature of the activity. The blended imaginary scenario gives participants a reason to (psychologically) invest in the activities and creates a context of relevance based on shared challenges and ‘concrete’ (task-oriented) goals (they can choose) to believe in and care about, which facilitates participation and voluntary compliance.

Creating an imaginary reality that ten other people are willing to invest in takes quite a bit of effort, but this is clearly motivated behaviour. “We do not establish mental spaces, connections between them, and blended spaces for no reason. We do this because it gives us global insight, human-scale understanding, and new meaning” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 92). Effective framing has the power to transform the group's experience, alter their perception of their own success and development as a team, and directly affect their behaviour and interaction throughout the entire series of problem-solving activities.

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<sup>64</sup> Although at the time this unique and imaginative response seemed to emerge spontaneously from the process of collaborative elaboration in this context, Helen Joannidi has pointed out (personal communication) that it may actually be a reference to shared background knowledge based on the ‘classic’ *Ha, Ha, Bonk [joke] book*:

“Q: What's yellow and dangerous? A: Shark-infested custard” (Ahlberg 1982: 62).



In the previous example participants were encouraged to help construct the imaginary scenario, which may lead to an increased sense of involvement; however, such fragmentary framing, with a number of optional hazards in the task scenario, may actually undermine some of the educational goals of the activity by creating a more individualized perception of the challenge rather than a 'team-oriented' perspective. Although each individual participant has their own unique (imaginary) reason for not touching the ground, because they haven't explicitly converged on the same scenario they may be more likely to experience success as an individual achievement rather than gain a shared sense of accomplishment as a group. Admittedly it's a subtle difference – whether we each succeeded on the same task separately or whether we accomplished something together – but I suspect that framing an activity in terms of a shared scenario makes the imaginary reality more 'real' for participants and leads to increased investment and more teamwork through the deliberate creation of a shared experience.<sup>65</sup>

### **Integrated action on the abseil**

My final example from the Conway Centre demonstrates how creative conceptual blending can bring about *integrated action* that effectively modifies behaviour in the immediate (real world) context. This extract was observed during an outdoor abseiling activity, and is similar to the skiing/waiter example (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 21) previously discussed; however, rather than teaching correct technique this imaginative blend was spontaneously introduced by the facilitator in a moment of crisis to help a frightened and flailing participant recover balance and composure while halfway down a coastal cliff:

#### IMAGINE YOU'RE ON THE TOILET

*Abseiling ~ participant being addressed is a 13 year-old boy:*

Staff: Listen, I want you to imagine that you're on the toilet, ok? A public toilet. You're sitting on the toilet and there's no lock on the door, but you don't want anyone to come in. So you've gotta hold the door shut with your feet, ok?

(Field notes)

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<sup>65</sup> As an individual I can choose to change the details of an imaginary scenario anytime, but if more people are invested in the same world then it becomes 'more real' because we're all constrained by a structure larger than ourselves and compelled to follow collective rules that seem to have an 'objective' existence independent of our individual lives. "A world so regarded attains a firmness in consciousness; it becomes real in an ever more massive way and it can no longer be changed so easily" (Berger & Luckman 45: 2002).

In reality this participant was struggling with fear and anxiety in an unfamiliar and challenging situation – hanging in the air on a relatively thin rope high off the ground – and beginning to panic because his feet had slipped on the slippery rock wall. However, the instant he heard these instructions he began to laugh a bit and naturally adopted the perfect body position to stabilize himself and complete the task. Through language the facilitator was able to prompt the creation of an imaginative and effective conceptual blend that allowed him to map the unconscious competence (and somewhat humorous associations) of sitting on the toilet onto this frightening and unfamiliar context/activity. The imaginative scenario (or input space) not only affected the participant's mood, but also modified his behaviour through integrated action based on a blended mental space. The reality of the cliff was never forgotten entirely, and the participant was not simply pretending to be on the toilet, instead there was partial projection from each input space that allowed the appropriate body position to emerge in the blend, which was then mapped back onto the reality of abseiling. Rather than facilitating a deep change in understanding, this was a purely functional blend designed to help the participant alter his own behaviour quickly and effectively in order to complete the task.

As these examples demonstrate, imaginative framing and conceptual blending can serve a variety of goals that facilitate empowerment in interaction – from creating the conditions for cooperation and an incentive for participation to triggering or teaching correct technique and modifying behaviour through integrated action. In the next section I discuss the parallels between pretend play and some of the vivid visualization techniques used in hypnotherapy.

### *Hypnotherapy*

There are several similarities between the language used during hypnotherapy and the imaginative framing, metaphors, and conceptual blending previously described in relation to problem-solving activities at the Conway Centre. In both contexts facilitators explicitly instruct participants to use their imaginations and engage in activities that require creative visualization or integrated action and are based (at least partially) on artificial scenarios. The next few examples highlight the parallels between these two data sets, and once again the emphasis is on promoting personal



growth and positive change (in real life) through an experience that is fundamentally created through language and interaction.

### **Framing & imagination**

In the previous chapter I discussed the discursive transition from pre-hypnosis into the hypnotic induction itself. The following extract is from the pre-hypnosis conversation between the therapist (H) and client (X), and demonstrates how the hypnotist frames the use of creative visualization in order to pre-emptively deal with resistance to completely ‘unrealistic’ or ‘impossible’ imaginary scenarios:

#### *IF I ASKED YOU TO SIT ON A CLOUD*

*Part of the pre-hypnosis conversation:*

H: y’know ok, if I asked you to, if I asked you to sit on a cloud and float, and, you say, that’s ridiculous. That’s ok it’s ridiculous, but can you *imagine* to sit on a cloud? Well, y’know, if we want to we all *can* do that; it’s will we do it or not.

(Hypno video)<sup>66</sup>

Therapy is typically considered quite a ‘serious’ activity, as clients are often seeking help with very real problems; in this context they are not simply playing or pretending, but engaging in an imaginative activity that is clearly meant to serve a practical purpose. Nevertheless,

The resemblance between the process of therapy and the phenomenon of play is, in fact, profound. Both occur within a delimited psychological frame, a spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages. In both play and therapy, the messages have a special and peculiar relationship to a more concrete or basic reality.

(Bateson 2000: 191)

Asking somebody to sit on a cloud is a ridiculous and physically impossible request; however, as a mental activity it is perfectly possible – “if we want to we all *can* do that; it’s will we do it or not.” Through discourse the therapist is setting up shared expectations for the imaginative process involved in (some forms of) hypnotherapy and establishing an appropriate interpretive frame that allows the client to make sense of ‘ridiculous’ requests, explore ‘impossible’ perspectives, and engage in ‘unrealistic’ activities.

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<sup>66</sup> This is my personal recording of a private hypnotherapy session with Dr. Alphonse Joseph, a doctor of clinical hypnotherapy; therefore, each extract is a direct quote of actual interaction between the therapist and patient.

**Metaphor, blending, & integrated action**

Similar to the external and primarily physical problem-solving activities at the Conway Centre, I believe that most of the internal and imaginative activities involved in hypnotherapy rely on the creation of blended mental spaces and very subtle forms of integrated action. In the same way that pretending to sit on the toilet and hold a door shut with your feet can put your body into the correct position for abseiling, vividly visualizing certain situations or processes can facilitate deliberate and conscious control of subtle physiological features related to deep relaxation. The following extract is taken from a period of guided relaxation during the first 10 minutes of actual hypnosis, and relies crucially on the client's ability to make sense of the metaphorical (and potentially ridiculous) request to actively "follow the sound of my voice":

FOLLOW THE SOUND OF MY VOICE

*During guided relaxation:*

H: I want you to listen to the sound of my voice... and I want you to follow the sound of my voice to different parts of your body. And as you follow my voice to that part of your body, bring all your focus and all of your awareness on that part of your body, and that part of your body will relax even deeper still. The more you focus, the more comfortably relaxed you'll feel.

(Hypno video)

Simply making sense of the initial request requires a metaphorical cross-space mapping that involves, for example, conceptualizing the range of sounds associated with a specific voice as a THING, and perhaps associating that abstract object with a PERSON (or some other intentional/animate THING you can *follow* from one place to another); however, fully understanding the instructions involves creating a blended mental space that draws together a variety of metaphorical relations, a basic frame of 'following' and sequential movement along a path, plus general background knowledge about each of the input domains. In the blended space the hypnotist's voice *is* the hypnotist (or some *thing* to follow) and body parts are physical *locations* – you can travel from one place to the next sequentially, and your 'focus' and 'awareness' are *things* you bring with you from place to place.

Listening to the sound of somebody's voice and understanding the words is one thing, but actually *following* somebody's voice is a distinctly different mental



activity. First you have to set up an imaginary world in which it is possible to follow a voice to different places/body parts – which is essentially the same as imagining a sinking pirate ship in a sea of shark-infested custard – and then you actually have to do the activity, by adapting your own behaviour to respond appropriately within the blend through integrated action. Hypnotherapy patients have to intentionally ‘bring their awareness to different places,’ ‘sit on clouds,’ and willingly participate in imaginary activities in the same way that participants had to ‘cross a raging river’ or ‘fix a flying carpet’ during the problem solving activities at the Conway Centre. Facilitators cannot force people to do anything against their will in either of these contexts, and the main difference is that the activities involved in hypnotherapy are all individual/internal and more mental than physical.

In the skiing/waiter example (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 21) and the abseiling/toilet extract previously discussed, the desired physical response was new and unfamiliar so it was taught through an imaginative example and performed within a blended mental space that brought those two realities together. I would like to suggest that something similar is happening during guided relaxation. Although most people seem to understand the concept of complete (physical) relaxation, few of us have the internal awareness to actually achieve it. We generally pay so little attention to body dynamics that we may end up with tension in muscles that we are not even aware of, or in parts of the body we seem to have no conscious control over, and simply telling people to ‘relax’ is problematic because, as simple as it sounds, we often don’t know *how* to do it. In the next few extracts the therapist uses language to prompt the creation of a vivid imaginative blend that allows him to lead the patient into specific parts of the body, suggest a systematic release of tension from those areas, and vividly describe what that might feel like.

*EVEN THE BONE CELLS, WHAT IF THEY COULD JUST RELAX?*

*During guided relaxation:*

H: And I want you to bring now all your sense, of feeling, all your sense of imagination around your forehead. I want you to actually imagine looking at your forehead, high up on your forehead from the inside rather than the outside, and I want you to imagine that every little muscle, every little nerve, and even the bone cells, what it would be like if they could just relax... and allow them to relax now.

(Hypno video)

Even if the patient cannot consciously control all the subtle aspects of physiology that combine to produce a deep sense of relaxation, the blend creates an imaginative mental space where it makes sense and can simply be *allowed* to happen. In this context, the physical relaxation that occurs is integrated action because it occurs within the blend, as a result of ‘seeing’ your forehead from the inside and imagining that every little muscle, nerve, and bone cell could just relax.<sup>67</sup> Although we often refer to physical or mental relaxation, I assume that few people ever imagine or actively attempt *cellular* relaxation under normal circumstances. Even the concept of ‘mental relaxation’ is just a metaphorical cross-space mapping that allows us to talk/think about the release or absence of (abstract) mental tension in terms of the (embodied) experience of physical relaxation. My point is that nerves, bones, and individual cells cannot *really* be relaxed, but leading the patient to imagine/pretend it is possible produces a deeper sense of relaxation through integrated action (i.e. real physical changes that occur as a result of this imaginary scenario).<sup>68</sup>

The process of hypnosis is much more interactive and collaborative than most people imagine. In all these examples, although the therapist introduces specific input spaces, the emergent structure and detail are drawn from the patient’s imagination and personal background knowledge. The therapist is using language to prompt for a certain kind of blend, but the patient is the one that actually creates it. In addition to imagining the inside of the forehead and tip of the tailbone, there are several other interesting internal activities that involve not only ‘seeing’ a new perspective or visualizing an activity, but somehow doing it as well – including relaxing the liver, spleen, and intestines. When the therapist suggests relaxing every nerve and every blood vessel, he is prompting the creation of a blended mental space that brings together any background knowledge of human anatomy and physiology (whether

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<sup>67</sup> Although the mental state may be distinctly different from hypnosis, many other forms of guided relaxation, guided meditation, and yoga or martial arts instruction also use language to prompt the creation of vivid mental spaces that facilitate subtle physical changes through creative visualization and integrated action.

<sup>68</sup> I consider this a subtle form of integrated action because the visualization is based on an imaginary/impossible scenario, but there are associated physiological changes that occur in the real world as a result. When I say that bone cells cannot *really* be relaxed I mean in a literal (i.e. physical) sense; metaphorically almost anything is possible. As a parallel example, consider the difference between (metaphorically) relaxing your *mind* and the challenge of (literally) relaxing your *brain*. Although I hesitate to say that it is impossible, I have no idea what it would mean to physically relax my brain, bones, or the individual cells in my body – right now it just doesn’t make sense to me.



accurate or not) with an *imagined* sense of agency and conscious control; however, this often produces *real* changes in heart rate and physical tension in various parts of the body. I consider this more than just a metaphorical cross-space mapping because rather than a change in understanding, the therapist is using language to initiate a change in action. Many of these instructions would be incomprehensible in another context (or mental state), since most people wouldn't know how to relax their liver, bone cells, nerves, or blood vessels, even if they wanted to; nevertheless, within the blend these become reasonable requests that can be imagined and somehow acted upon.

This gradual process of guided relaxation goes on for over 10 minutes, and immediately following the previous extract there is a subtle shift from following the voice to following that sense of relaxation itself. Unlike 'focus' and 'awareness,' which are (metaphorically) *brought* from one place to the next, 'relaxation' is conceptualized as some THING which (metaphorically) *spreads, drifts, and washes* through the body – as if coating it in a thick, warm, fluid sense of deep peace:

#### LIQUID RELAXATION

*Four separate extracts from the same guided relaxation:*

H: And as that relaxation washes down, from the base of your neck down to your mid back, you'll feel yourself wanting to drift down more comfortably relaxed physically... Follow it down over each bone, over each little bump on the spine. Allow it to drift out around your ribs, all the way out to the sides of your body...

---[cut]---

...imagine that sense of relaxation washing down over your.. low back. Spreading down over the bones of the pelvis, and all the way down to your tailbone...

---[cut]---

...imagine what it would look like, if you could see right on the very tip of the tailbone. Imagine what it would be like if you could see.. your view of relaxation just hanging off the tip of the tailbone, ready to drop off...

---[cut]---

...relaxation pouring right down to your ankles...

(Hypno video)

This whole process relies on implicit collaboration. The therapist *suggests* a concept of 'relaxation' as a warm liquid gently washing over the body, but the details that

make it ‘real’ come from the patient’s imagination and background knowledge, which is why the emphasis is on “*your* view of relaxation.”

Blending serves a variety of functions during hypnotherapy. Within the blends various mental ‘objects’ can be manipulated, ‘impossible’ questions can be asked or answered, and new relations or insight can emerge as different perspectives are explored. Once this mental space has been created the elements and relations within it can be modified and elaborated in countless ways; anything can be done here – but only by choice. Whenever the patient answered a question with “I don’t know” the therapist would simply respond, “But if you *did* know, what would it be?” This exchange was repeated as many times as necessary, and eventually there was always a coherent response of some kind.

### **Is it real or not?**

With the examples from the Conway Centre I demonstrated how effective framing of an imaginary scenario can create the conditions and incentive to develop real teamwork and communication skills through collaborative interaction in a completely ‘unrealistic’ context. In a similar way, the creative visualization involved in the process of hypnotherapy creates the opportunity for major personal changes in interpretation, understanding, and behaviour – vivid blended mental spaces allow patients to do, explore, and experience things that might be considered ‘unrealistic’ or ‘impossible’ under ordinary circumstances; however, insights and conclusions based on experiences in the blend can be mapped back onto the original inputs (i.e. ‘reality’ or ‘everyday life’) to empower people and provide new options or effective solutions to real problems.

As far as imagination and the reality of these experiences are concerned, according to Dr. Alphonse Joseph (the hypnotherapist quoted throughout this thesis), the main issue is whether or not the patient is able to obtain the changes they desire:

Is it real or not real? I, personally, I do believe that it’s real. Does it matter? I don’t really care. What matters is that ...they take themselves to a point or place... to adjust to a new change that they’re looking for or an identification of why they’re doing what they’re doing... and, are able to obtain change ...just by looking at it from a different viewpoint.

(Hypno video)



The underlying purpose of these activities is to facilitate learning, growth, and practical empowerment in the real world, and the point of this chapter is to illustrate how discourse and interaction can produce vivid and useful imaginary mental spaces that affect perception, interpretation, and behaviour in a range of contexts. This section has explored parallels between the internal activities involved in hypnotherapy and the use of pretend play in experiential education, demonstrating how facilitators in both contexts use language to prompt the creation of a functional blend within a coherent interpretive frame and use artificial or ‘unrealistic’ scenarios to lead participants through new and somewhat challenging experiences that promote positive change and personal growth. It doesn’t matter whether the blend is ‘realistic’ or not as long as it is vivid, engaging, and produces the desired change in perspective, understanding, or action. Once the change itself has occurred it becomes a *real* memory or experience, which can be mapped back onto the original input space in order to justify new choices in everyday life.

The next section deals with similar strategies in the context of firewalking seminars, illustrating how conceptual metaphor, blending, and integrated action allow people to ‘walk through their fear’ and actively attempt the ‘impossible.’ Once again, the point of the activity is to facilitate a powerful change in perspective, and regardless of how or why it is possible to walk barefoot across hot coals, once you have actually done it the experience itself is undeniably *real* and raises some challenging questions.

### *Firewalking*

This thesis is fundamentally about using language to change people’s perspective in positive and empowering ways in a range of different contexts. The first chapter focussed on framing – a deliberate attempt to change or influence another person’s perspective and interpretation by hiding or highlighting certain features or relations through discourse and interaction. The emphasis in this chapter is on the use of imagination, conceptual blending, and integrated action – how language use can prompt the creation of metaphorical cross-space mappings that change people’s understanding of a situation or event and trigger the development of blended mental spaces that create appropriate conditions or incentives for people to modify their own behaviour. These discourse strategies are more effective than simple instructions because they allow facilitators to teach people to do things they don’t know *how* to

do, and in some cases even lead people to do things they previously considered *impossible*.

Telling children to ‘cooperate’ and ‘work together as a team’ is just as meaningless as telling an adult to ‘relax completely’ unless they already know *how* to do it – in both cases the participants may understand the words and fully believe it is possible, but still not know what to do. Conceptual blending allows facilitators to create useful (interpretive) links between the known and the unknown, giving participants the confidence and competence to engage in challenging new activities. However, in firewalking workshops the question that needs to be addressed is not *what* to do – because basically, you just walk – but *how* is this activity humanly possible and *why* would anyone want to do it? Facilitators need to answer these questions and provide an interpretive frame that makes sense in order to convince people to participate.

### **Conceptual metaphor & the creation of meaning**

Similar to the activities discussed in other contexts, language is used to create the conditions that motivate participants to *act*, and the underlying purpose is empowerment. Once a person has actually walked on fire, regardless of why they chose to do it, (the memory of) that experience is real and can promote positive long-term change by justifying new choices in other contexts. The first example is from a firewalking seminar in the USA led by Tony Robbins and illustrates how the activity is explicitly framed in terms empowerment and overcoming fear in other contexts.

#### THE FIREWALK IS A METAPHOR

*Direct quote from a firewalking seminar with Tony Robbins:*

Remember, the ‘Fear into Power Seminar’ is not about firewalking. The firewalk is a metaphor. What I’m really here to teach people is a series of very specific skills to break through any limitations they have created in their lives. Fear of failure, fear of success, fear of rejection or of public speaking – what the fear is doesn’t matter. I teach people to change the way they feel about themselves and how to operate effectively in their worlds. It’s not about firewalking. I could teach you to firewalk in ten minutes, five if you’re sharp.

(Tony Robbins, quoted in Sternfield 1992: 24-25)

In the interactive seminars that I have studied, people are not simply shown that firewalking is possible, they are taught, which inevitably involves language and interaction. Furthermore, participants are not only taught how to do it, but more



significantly, they are taught what it means. From a pragmatic perspective, a firewalking workshop can be considered a specific goal-defined social event (cf. Levinson 1979 – *activity type*); however, somewhat paradoxically, many facilitators insist that it's not actually *about* walking on fire – it's about *fear*, and changing the way people feel about themselves. Firewalking is not a practical skill or pleasant pastime like swimming, skiing, or rock-climbing; there is always some deeper sense of purpose attached to crossing the coals unscathed and the *meaning* of that accomplishment is context-specific, collaboratively defined, and negotiated in interaction.

In Tony Robbins' *Fear into Power* seminar “the firewalk is a metaphor for the impossible in our lives, for those too-frequent situations that feel like red-hot coals” (Sternfield 1992: 26). In examples from other sources the firewalk is framed as a “catalyst which enables people to reach out and go beyond self-imposed limitations” (Mental Combat website), “an unforgettable demonstration of human potential” (Quantum Leaps Lodge website), and “an assertion of personal sovereignty” (Mental Combat website). All these examples demonstrate professional firewalk facilitators using language (via their websites) to prompt imaginative cross-space mappings between different domains in order to create a meaningful *reason* to engage in the activity, which is basically the same process that was discussed in relation to the problem-solving and hypnotherapy data. Once again, language helps establish shared expectations and create the incentive for active participation.

In these brief examples there are several metaphors that are meant to help (potential) participants understand the facilitators' perspective, and making sense of these statements involves conceptualizing ‘the activity of firewalking’ as a *metaphor* or *catalyst*, conceptualizing ‘limitations’ as some THING *self-imposed* that you can *go beyond*, etc. However, it doesn't make any sense to ask whether firewalking is *really* “an assertion of personal sovereignty” (whatever that means) because that whole idea is merely an imaginary mental space connection, which you can choose to believe in and elaborate or not. Similar to previous examples from other contexts, none of this is *real* (in a strictly ‘objective’ sense) – it doesn't matter whether you pretend the ground is covered in spikes or lava (Conway Centre), and it doesn't matter whether

your idea of ‘liquid relaxation’ matches mine (Hypnotherapy) – the whole point is to get people to modify their behaviour and respond in a particular way.

Either you walk or you don’t. There’s no maybe or not; there’s no “I’ll try to walk” – you don’t *try* to walk across a fire – you either put one foot in front of the other and walk, or you do not.

(Napolitano 1993)

### **Integrated action**

Although both metaphor and blending involve a cross-space mapping that affects understanding and interpretation, I find an analysis based on blending more useful in this context because my emphasis is on action. Rather than merely understanding one domain in terms of another, making sense of these examples involves drawing together a mix of elements and relations from multiple domains, which allows participants to do impossible/imaginary things and (inter)act within a blended mental-space that is neither 100% reality nor complete fantasy.

The fire and feet are real, and they might burn or they might not, but either way any *meaning* attached to that event is the result of subjective interpretation. “The fire doesn’t care whether you walk or not – it’s neutral – but there are those of us that are called to it and choose to walk” (Napolitano 1993). For participants, the experience is undeniably real; it’s not a dream or hallucination. However, the interpretation and implications are often a collaborative (imaginary) product of negotiated meaning in interaction. Simply getting from one side of the fire to the other is not the point – the underlying goal is *empowerment*.

### PUTTING YOUR FEARS INTO THE FIRE

In most of my data on firewalking, various introspective exercises are woven into the workshops in order to encourage participants to attach a more personal sense of meaning and significance to this activity. Although much of this work is individual and non-verbal, there are interactive elements that rely on language use, conceptual metaphor, and integrated action within a blended mental space. During the firewalking workshop at Quantum Leaps Lodge, which I personally participated in, we were each given a square wooden board approximately 1 inch thick and asked to draw pictures on the board representing our fears, doubts, and limitations, or anything else we felt was ‘holding us back’ and preventing us from ‘living fully’ or being our ‘highest’ selves. On the back of these boards we also wrote two lists: one



for all the positive qualities we wanted more of in life, and another for all the negative things we wanted to ‘overcome’ and ‘leave behind.’ Afterward, we were separated into groups of three and given an opportunity to discuss our drawings and lists, infusing these boards with symbolic meaning by explaining their significance to others, before ceremonially breaking them with our bare fists and throwing them onto the fire.

Although several participants spoke English as a second language, everybody seemed to easily understand the monolingual instructions and underlying conceptual metaphors involved in these activities. Through this exercise, doubts, fears, and limitations were clarified and externalized through symbolic drawings and interactive language use; the lists allowed participants to clearly define personal attributes they were hoping to lose or gain through walking on fire, and discussing the drawings not only forced them to put their doubts and fears into words but also created a symbolic connection between those words and the wood itself. Language use is an integral part of these activities because it can lead participants to think of vague intangible concepts in a way that allows them to be actively worked with and overcome. A whole range of individual insecurities, aspirations, and other abstract ideas become THINGS that can be taken out of yourself and *put into* words, *put into* the wood, and *put into* the fire.

Understanding the exercise involves making sense of several metaphors; however, I would argue that actually doing the activity involves integrated action within a blended mental space. Consider the ceremonial board-breaking: In ‘reality’ all this requires is snapping a one-inch piece of pine in two and tossing it onto the fire; however, symbolically this physical action is metaphorically associated with *breaking through* all the fears and limitations the board now represents. Just like the problem-solving activities previously discussed, one input for the blend is the immediate ‘objective’ context of the situation, and the other is a completely imaginary space where fears, doubts, and limitations can be physically grappled with and overcome. Various elements in these two source domains are (metaphorically) related, but the blend in which the activity takes place is a separate hybrid space that brings together features from each input to produce integrated action – participants

are not just breaking a board, and they are not just symbolically ‘breaking through’ their fears, they achieve both simultaneously.

For some participants, punching through a wooden board was clearly an intimidating idea and a significant accomplishment, because before that moment it was something they didn’t know they could (physically) do and their uncertainty was evident in their hesitation and body language. At the same time, doubt or fear about breaking the board was symbolically associated with all the doubts and fears that were holding them back and preventing them from living fully or being who they want to be. When success in the blended space is mapped back onto the original inputs we end up with two meaningful accomplishments that each bring participants one step closer to firewalking – on the one hand, they have done something physical that they may not have previously believed possible, (so perhaps walking barefoot on hot coals is possible too); and on the other hand they have (metaphorically) faced their fears and broken through them, (demonstrating that fear *can* be overcome). This is distinctly different than just imagining what it would be like to shatter your fears and doubts or cast them into a fire – because this idea is blended with the actual physical activity it can be interpreted and integrated as a *real* experience. This is not something participants have simply thought about, but something they feel as if they have actually done.

This board-breaking exercise is also incorporated into firewalking/empowerment seminars in the UK and framed in a similar way – “it’s all about breaking through new barriers” (Mental Combat video). There is also some evidence that participants adopt the language and metaphors of the facilitators and incorporate these ideas into their personal belief systems:

Firewalking is a big metaphor, and it’s the fact that if I can walk across that fire, this is me now, as the person I’m not happy with, and on the other side of the fire is the person, my fresh start and the person that I’m going to now become, and you walk across the fire and you leave the old you behind.

(Adult male participant, UK – Mental Combat video)



WALKING THROUGH YOUR FEAR

The board-breaking exercise allowed participants to articulate and externalize some of their doubts, fears, and perceived limitations, making the activity of firewalking more personally meaningful and creating shared expectations of empowerment; however, we had also thrown a list of *positive* attributes into the fire. When the time came to finally cross the glowing coal-bed our facilitator, Brian, encouraged us to walk at least twice – once to shed all those insecurities and negative qualities, leaving them behind in the fire to burn away into smoke and ash, and then in the opposite direction to promote healing and invite those positive attributes we'd identified to come into our lives. Brian demonstrated by strolling casually across the coals with a calm smile on his face, first in one direction and then the other.

Objectively, we were all in the same situation, facing the 'realistic' possibility of severely burning our feet; however, rather than a single, shared understanding of the significance of this event, we each had our own individual interpretation of what we were doing and why. This lack of convergence is important because it allowed individuals with different backgrounds and belief systems to approach the experience of firewalking with an open mind – as a new choice or previously unknown option – and make sense of it in their own way, without getting sidetracked and stressed-out trying to converge on a common understanding of how it works or what the implications might be. In all my firewalking data the facilitators use language to prompt the creation of empowering blended mental spaces that mix the reality of physical motion across the coals with imaginative concepts of healing, growth, and personal change. The positive (or negative) attributes are defined individually, creating a personalized sense of purpose, and background knowledge about the (literal or metaphorical) properties of fire can be used to complete and elaborate the blend.

At Quantum Leaps Lodge we were told, “everything you know about fire is true; but this is also true” (Brian Olynek, field notes). In an American firewalking video the facilitator says, “as children we are told over and over not to touch or play with fire; we are told that fire burns – and that is true – but fire also *heals*. ...You can literally use that fire tonight to heal you” (Napolitano 1993). As for the fear itself, in the words of another American firewalk facilitator:

The methods we're going to give you tonight are methods to overcome *fear*. Now, I'm not saying when you get out there, you'll be free from fear, but I'm saying the fear won't stop you. You will have tools that will enable you to experience the fear – and then walk right through it. And if you can do it tonight, and step out on that coal bed, you'll be able to do it the next time you want to ask for a job or a raise in salary.

(Tolly Burkan, quoted in Sternfield 1992: 46)

The idea that you can feel the fear and *choose* to act anyway is a common theme throughout all the firewalking seminars I have studied and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. In this section I am particularly interested in highlighting the metaphor of 'walking through your fear' and how that combines with physical movement and awareness of the objective context to form a blended mental space that produces integrated action.

There is much more than a single cross-space mapping here; all the framing and elaborate mental space work accomplished in the previous exercises contributes to the blend. One input can be considered the 'objective' reality of feet, fire, and fellow participants; while elsewhere in mental space we have these metaphorical concepts of fear *holding us back* or preventing us from *going* where we want to go,<sup>69</sup> which are equated with living life more fully and becoming who we want to be. There are real fears associated with firewalking (i.e. pain and burning), plus a whole range of personal doubts and insecurities that have been extracted from other contexts and symbolically/ceremonially attached to this activity and *put into* the fire. Therefore, there is an imaginary layer of reality with 'impossible' and 'unrealistic' relations blended with participants' direct experience of the immediate context. They are not hallucinating or fantasizing about physically interacting with their deepest fears and personal issues, nor are they simply grounded in the objective reality of the situation – as they walk barefoot across red-hot coals in the real world they are simultaneously walking *through* an intangible barrier of fear, 'shedding' those negative attributes they have personally identified, and perhaps 'healing' on some deeper emotional or conceptual level. Although metaphors create links across mental-space that aid understanding, it is conceptual blending that brings abstract elements and imaginary

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<sup>69</sup> The underlying conceptual metaphors are LIFE IS A JOURNEY (or motion along a PATH), and FEAR IS A PHYSICAL RESTRAINT (or OBSTACLE) between the individual and their destination/goals.



relations together with physical interaction in the real world to produce a truly empowering and transformational experience. In the words of another participant:

The fact that you *can* walk across fire barefooted, uh, exists – you can walk across fire barefooted – walking through your fear and having a clear motive for walking across the fire, uh, that’s where the magic comes in. Um, walking through your fear is, is the, is like the doorway to newer possibilities for yourself.

(Adult male participant, USA – Napolitano 1993)

### **Summary**

Doubt is not some THING you can simply discard, and self-confidence cannot *really* be ‘lost’ or ‘found’ – these are just conventional and metaphorical ways of thinking and speaking. Most of the time when we ‘wrestle’ with our fears it is a purely imaginary (analogy of the) mental or emotional activity, although there may be overt physiological side-effects. The observations of firewalk facilitation discussed in this chapter have demonstrated how metaphors affect the way we think about these abstract and intangible THINGS, and shown how various imaginary activities can be linked to physical action through conceptual blending. In particular, I have argued that blended mental spaces create the conditions for integrated action, which allows participants to (partially) externalize their own internal issues and physically confront their fears. Firewalk facilitators use language to suggest metaphorical connections that affect interpretation and prompt the creation of blended mental spaces that not only make sense of firewalking and invest the activity with deeper meaning, but also lead participants to experience a *real* sense of accomplishment, both internally and externally.

The overall purpose of this chapter has been to highlight similarities across three different data sets in order to argue that creative facilitators often use ‘unrealistic’ or ‘imaginary’ scenarios to bring about *real* change and empowerment. Through language facilitators prompt the creation of useful metaphors and blended mental spaces that affect interpretation and interaction. Blending aspects of an imaginary world (or mental space) with our ordinary perception of reality can serve a variety of functions in social interaction, from creating appropriate conditions and incentives for participation to helping people do things they do not know how to do, or may not even believe to be possible. In terms of the pragmatics of empowerment, the examples and analysis in this chapter have shown how language can convince people

to engage in 'impossible' activities and do things that cannot 'realistically' be done, creating imaginary realities that enhance participants' subjective sense of accomplishment and promote positive change in the real world. Building on the previous discussion and analysis, the next chapter deals primarily with the issues of fear and social performance.





CHAPTER FIVE:  
**Fear & Social Performance**

Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger;  
anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering.  
~ Jedi Master Yoda<sup>70</sup>

**Introduction**

The research involved in preparing this thesis has allowed me to investigate empowerment across a wide range of contexts, and in the process led me to reflect upon the tremendous power of *fear* and its influence on people's lives. Whether the goal is to trigger a change in perspective that reveals new options or to encourage participants to step outside their comfort zones and attempt the 'impossible,' *fear* is often the root cause of resistance and therefore the primary challenge to overcome. This chapter examines the issue of fear from an interactional perspective, with an emphasis on social performance and collaboration, which highlights the importance of language use during various activities designed to facilitate empowerment. Language not only allows participants to *express* their fears and other invisible aspects of their subjective experience, but also allows facilitators to actively deconstruct and *redefine* the experience of fear itself through negotiated meaning in interaction.

*Theoretical Background*

The theoretical background for this chapter begins with a brief discussion of rule-governed behaviour and the role of language in human learning, but focuses primarily on the presentation of self in everyday life and the social construction of reality in general. My interest is in negotiated meaning in interaction and the implicit collaboration involved in converging on a shared sense of reality. This chapter begins to blur the distinction between 'real' and 'imaginary' preserved in the previous chapters, and extends the discussion to consider the *social* aspects of knowledge acquisition, including shared assumptions and the perception of (im)possibility. These issues are relevant to the pragmatics of empowerment because they often foster a belief in artificial or self-imposed limitations, which can be challenged or deconstructed through discourse in interaction. As Goffman points out (1990: 72), the "impressions fostered in everyday performances are subject to

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<sup>70</sup> *Star Wars – Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), [film] by George Lucas.



disruption,” and clever facilitators can exploit that instability to introduce new interpretations of a situation or suggest alternative responses. Therefore, in order to understand and promote empowerment in various contexts:

We will want to know what kind of impression of reality can shatter the fostered impression of reality, and what reality *really is* can be left to other students. We will want to ask, ‘What are the ways in which a given impression can be discredited?’ and this is not quite the same as asking, ‘What are the ways in which the given impression is false?’

(Goffman 1990: 72-73, my emphasis)

### **Fear, learning, & language**

It has been suggested that we are born with just two fears – fear of falling and a fear of loud noises – the rest are all *learned* behaviour (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 36;),<sup>71</sup> and competent language use is a unique and fundamental feature of human learning.<sup>72</sup> Not only is language central to formal education and the primary means of preserving and sharing knowledge among human beings, both interpersonally and historically, it also affects the way we make sense of the world and *the way we learn* in general – whether through direct experience, observation and modelling, or explicit instruction.

### CONTINGENCY-SHAPED VS. RULE-GOVERNED BEHAVIOUR

In addition to issues of categorization and subjective interpretation (discussed in previous chapters), within applied behaviour analysis there is an important distinction between *contingency-shaped* behaviour (CSB), which is based on the direct experience of immediate consequences, and *rule-governed* behaviour (RGB). Contingency-shaped behaviour is common to both humans and animals; however, rule-governed behaviour depends on language, and therefore may be uniquely human. Studies of Pavlovian conditioning have shown that people often acquire fears and other maladaptive responses to specific stimuli as a result of unpleasant experiences (CSB); for example, we may learn to avoid certain foods when we become ill after eating them, even if the food itself didn’t actually cause the illness

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<sup>71</sup> This has been attributed to Brian Tracy, a best-selling author, motivational speaker, and apparently one of America’s leading authorities on the development of human potential ([www.briantracy.com](http://www.briantracy.com)). The (implied) academic research this claim is based upon is unknown; however, research at the University of California, Berkeley, actually suggests that we are *not* born with a fear of falling – it generally develops a few weeks after an infant begins crawling (see Berkeley baby center website).

<sup>72</sup> I am grateful to Laura Knott and Dr. Neil Dugdale (department of psychology, Bangor University), for introducing me to this area of research and bringing the role of language in human learning to my attention.

(Grant & Evans 1994: 412). However, through language use human beings acquire the ability to describe themselves and their environment, to formulate verbal rules or strategies, and to modify their own behaviour on the basis of those rules (Bentall, Lowe, & Beasty 1985: 165).

Life is full of rules, perhaps too many. There are laws, regulations, and guidelines; unwritten codes, taboos, and norms; proverbs, superstitions, and commandments; instruction manuals, textbooks, and recipes. In addition to all the rules our society expects us to follow, we adopt our own personal codes of conduct, rules that we apply to our own behaviour.

(Grant & Evans 1994: 316)

In the absence of an adequate linguistic repertoire, non-verbal humans and animals are still capable of *learning* – they do modify their behaviour in response to stimuli – however, various psychological experiments have shown that the response patterns of young children gradually becomes less ‘animal-like’ as they acquire language and learn to follow instructions or formulate self-rules (Bentall & Lowe 1987; Bentall, Lowe, & Beasty 1985). Language use is uniquely human and has a profound influence on the way we learn to interpret and interact with the natural and social world (Bentall, Lowe, & Beasty 1985: 165), and adults often find it difficult to ‘turn off’ rule governed control mechanisms acquired earlier in life (Grant & Evans 1994: 320). That is to say, certain behavioural strategies or responses may become so ‘natural’ that we forget they were self-created and fail to notice how we habitually modify our own behaviour on the basis of (artificial/imaginary) ‘rules’ that may have once served some purpose but may no longer be necessary or beneficial.

Language allows us to learn from other people, not only through observation and modelling, but also from various written or verbal warnings, suggestions, and personal accounts that offer vicarious exposure to the (probable/potential and hypothetically hazardous) consequences of certain behaviour in situations we have only imagined. Rule-governed behaviour is central to ‘logical’ thinking and allows us to respond appropriately to new situations *the first time* because we ‘know the rules’ and can ‘predict’ the consequences, which speeds up the learning process and often protects people from harm (Grant & Evans 1994: 333-335).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Sometimes the consequences of our actions are direct and deadly (e.g. eating a poisonous mushroom), while in other cases they may be indirect, delayed, or imperceptible but equally important or unpleasant, (e.g. high cholesterol, lung cancer, or climate change).



However, RGB can also become insensitive to changes in context and consequences, leading to blind obedience, social rigidity, and serious behavioural problems based on odd or superstitious beliefs (Grant & Evans 1994: 320). “Although most phobias are acquired through direct conditioning, phobias can also be learned through modeling and through rule-governed control” (Grant & Evans 1994: 412).<sup>74</sup> Certain behaviour may seem perfectly ‘logical’ to someone with an intense fear, phobia, or superstition because their interpretation of the situation and the ‘appropriate’ response are based on the same basic principles as other forms of rule-governed behaviour, which means the imaginary consequences are just as ‘real’ as anything else they believe about the world that is imperceptible in the present moment.

In both science and everyday life it would be helpful to remember that everything we think we *know* about the world is, on some level, hypothetical and subject to change (Ristimaki 2006). We are constantly constructing tentative rules about what *might be true* in order to guide our own behaviour in context and interaction, repeatedly acting upon those that appear to help us and modifying or discarding those that are ineffective (Grant & Evans 1994: 333). Our idealized cognitive models are never a perfect reflection of reality, and it is common for most of us to understand the world in terms of multiple theories that are inconsistent with each other (Lakoff 1987: 118-121). In addition to advice, warnings, instructions, self-talk, and other forms of rule-governed behaviour, through framing, categorization, and imagination language also affects the way we learn from direct observation and modelling. Labelling an example with words like ‘better/worse,’ ‘safe/dangerous,’ or ‘mature/childish’ can influence the way people interpret the behaviour they observe, and guided visualization allows us to engage in covert modelling (i.e. imagining the target behaviour), which may be just as effective as actual observation in some situations (Grant & Evans 1994: 295). Seeing typically involves implicit and automatic categorization (Lakoff 1987: 126), which links an experience to previous knowledge about different *kinds* of people, situations, and activities; therefore, as a result of language children are taught to ‘see’ the world based on what society says about it. As people internalize that process they begin to build their own unique veil of

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<sup>74</sup> According to *the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR), the definition of a *phobia* is “marked and persistent fear that is excessive or unreasonable cued by the presence or anticipation of a specific object or situation” (American Psychiatric Association 2000: 213).

interpretation between themselves and the world and learn to modify their behaviour based on assumptions, expectations, and rules. We use cognitive models to make sense of the world, and “ordinary people without any technical expertise have theories, either implicit or explicit, about every important aspect of their lives” (Lakoff 1987: 118). We have both folk and expert theories of education, language, emotion, etc. and our ideas about fear affect the way it is understood, experienced, and acted upon.

### **Various forms & functions of fear**

In English we distinguish between different forms of fear on the basis of intensity, duration, implied cause/source, and presupposed relationship/response. For example, abstract nouns such as apprehension, anxiety, and terror are metaphorically conceptualized as some THING we HAVE or can be FILLED WITH, implying an external source;<sup>75</sup> however, we can also BE apprehensive, anxious, or terrified, which embodies the emotion and implicitly identifies with it. On the other hand, worry and panic are what people DO in response to a scary (external) situation, whether real or imagined.

These (subjective) emotional experiences are each associated with both a psychological (mental) and physiological (physical) response, although the symptoms or observable characteristics of this mental/emotional state may vary considerably from one individual to another. Identifying ‘real’ fear is problematic because it may be related to real (or perceived) risks, an immediate (or imaginary) threat to personal health and safety, or a genuinely dangerous situation (i.e. context). However, it could also be based upon deeper emotional and social issues that are more difficult to observe and verify, including fear of rejection, embarrassment, loneliness, inadequacy, etc. (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 37). When we talk about ‘genuine’ fear or ‘real’ fear it seems to simultaneously highlight the intensity and authenticity of the fear response, often implying an automatic and involuntary (physical) reaction.

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<sup>75</sup> Based on the underlying idea/conceptual metaphor that the BODY IS A CONTAINER and PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL STATES ARE ENTITIES WITHIN A PERSON (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 29, 50).



THE PHYSIOLOGICAL FEAR RESPONSE

Although the context is much more dangerous and emotionally intense than the situations/social encounters I have analysed, research into the effects of combat stress on US military personnel can offer some insight into the physiological response associated with genuine fear under extreme circumstances. Based on US Army field manuals, psychological studies, and medical reports, Hedges (2003) provides a clear and descriptive summary of what happens to the body and mind under combat conditions, including important differences between alert anxiety, uncontrollable fear, and panic.

According to Hedges (2003: 71-77), fear affects everyone in combat – from fear of dying and fear of unknown weapons, to fear of being afraid in front of your comrades and fear of causing grief to family and loved ones if you die. Fear affects your mental state and may interfere with your ability to see, think, or control your body; however, not all combat reactions are negative: stress can also make you more alert and responsive, which allows you to focus and react more quickly.

Your brain will activate its “fight or flight” system. It will release a massive discharge of stress hormones. Your heart rate will jump from roughly 70 beats per minute to more than 200 beats per minute in less than a second. Blood flow to your large muscle masses will increase, making you stronger and faster. Minor blood vessels in your hands and feet will constrict, to reduce bleeding from wounds.

(Hedges 2003: 71)

The fight or flight response also enlarges the pupils of your eyes, which broadens your field of vision; however, common by-products of this reaction include tunnel vision, the loss of fine and complex motor control, and the inability to think clearly (Hedges 2003: 71). During their first experience of combat some people may experience a shaking fit or curl up in the foetal position, and certain aspects of military training are designed to desensitize recruits before their first experience of *real* combat and systematically override the natural fear response through Pavlovian conditioning (Hedges 2003: 71, 77).

In one division that saw heavy fighting in World War II, a quarter of the soldiers said they had been so scared during the battle they vomited. A similar number said they had urinated or defecated in their pants in combat. This is a physical reaction to fear. It has nothing to do with your ability or willingness to fight.

(Hedges 2003: 76)

Fortunately, the extreme fear and violence associated with active warfare are not a ‘normal’ part of everyday life for most North Americans and Europeans (right now); however, in many parts of the world these kinds of experiences may be far too real and frequent to tolerate. Although combat is an extreme example that does not directly parallel the activities I have analysed, the comparison between combat stress and the fear involved in abseiling or firewalking highlights the difference between a *constructive level of anxiety* (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 25) and a truly *traumatizing* experience. When people panic they may literally become paralysed with fear or begin to behave irrationally, putting themselves and others at risk (Hedges 2003: 77). Needless to say, this kind of extreme fear does not create a positive learning experience, and as far as empowerment is concerned, the goal of all the facilitators I have observed is always to push people to the edge of their personal comfort zone in a safe and controlled environment – into the stretch, growth, or challenge zone, but never to the point of panic. Nevertheless, I have observed participants *claiming* to shake uncontrollably or be unable to move in order to create the impression of extreme fear, which I have analysed in terms of social performance and will discuss in relation to specific examples in this chapter.

### EMOTIONS AT THE EDGE

Fear is not necessarily a ‘negative’ emotion; it serves an important purpose – to protect us from harm. However, that internal warning system needs to be understood in relation to context; otherwise it may trigger an inappropriate or undesirable reaction. In terms of learning and empowerment, fear and other challenging emotions are not just barriers that hold us back, but resources for increasing awareness of our own automatic or habitual ways of responding in the world. In all the contexts I have studied these awkward feelings are normal/natural, and the point is not to avoid or eliminate them but to experience and understand them in order to appreciate the way they affect our lives.



In their work on experiential learning Luckner and Nadler (1997) emphasize the value of “edgework,” deliberately highlighting or freezing those powerful moments on the verge of success or failure, when we come to the edge of what is no longer comfortable and must decide whether to move forward or retreat. As people approach this unknown territory their sense of disequilibrium and uncertainty increases, leading to intensified feelings of fear or excitement and various physiological symptoms such as sweating palms, pacing, and changes in heart rate, breathing, posture, pupil dilation, etc. (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 29). In addition, the ‘internal conversation’ participants have with themselves gets ‘louder’ and various self-limiting beliefs may surface (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 29). Rather than blindly pushing past these intense emotions in order to achieve a certain goal, some facilitators of outdoor/adventure activities advocate making participants more consciously aware of all the mental, emotional, and physiological changes taking place in those moments of crisis. The purpose is to help people recognize how they personally sabotage their efforts or promote their own successes, encourage them to take responsibility for those thoughts, feeling, and behavioural patterns, and then experiment with new options or strategies (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 32). Luckner and Nadler (1997: 38) suggest that fear can be thought of as a gauge to be read, or a yellow light that means ‘proceed with caution,’ rather than a flashing red light that means DANGER, STOP, or GO BACK. By understanding how they habitually respond in stressful situations participants begin to gain insight into how to change, control, or cope with that behaviour – recognizing and responding to fear rather than reacting automatically. Through effective framing and facilitation, individuals can be taught to expect and prepare for intense feelings of fear, doubt, or uncertainty. Facilitators can describe some of the primary signs and predictable changes in physiology that accompany these emotions and help participants become more aware of how they decide whether something is ‘safe’ or ‘dangerous’ and ‘possible’ or ‘impossible.’

Luckner and Nadler (1997: 39) also emphasize the shared nature of belief systems by drawing Kuhn’s ([1962] 1996) concept of a *paradigm*, or shared vision of reality, and point out that the dominant paradigm is seldom stated explicitly, is generally unquestioned, and is clung to tenaciously once accepted. This use of the term paradigm (and the potential for an immediate/individual ‘paradigm shift’) was also observed in a Canadian firewalking workshop that will be discussed later in this



chapter; however, the idea that facilitators can introduce a radically new way of perceiving the world and that the group can become a community that organizes itself around a new ‘paradigm’ may not be the same sense or concept that Kuhn originally intended.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, in social interaction people do seem to orient themselves to a shared situational definition and interpret the behaviour of other people on the basis of sociocultural background knowledge and commonsense assumptions, which can be negotiated and changed through verbal description, dialogue, and social performance.

### Social performance

*The presentation of self in everyday life* (Goffman [1971] 1990) is essentially about ‘impression management’ – the subtle ways in which an individual, deliberately or unintentionally, influences the perception, inferences, and expectations of other people. According to Goffman, “this control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate” (Goffman 1990: 15), in other words, the (implicit) negotiation of meaning and context, primarily through language.

“Language is never *all* that matters socially, because it is always accompanied by other meaningful aspects of interaction” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 5); nevertheless, it is extremely powerful and versatile. Various aspects of physical location and appearance also contribute to the overall impression one creates – including clothing, props, insignia, and relatively obvious biological characteristics such as age, sex, skin colour, etc.<sup>77</sup> However, language use is absolutely central to

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<sup>76</sup> Kuhn (1996) was specifically discussing *the structure of scientific revolutions*, and therefore changes in a shared worldview on a much larger scale. In introducing the term *paradigm* he refers to scientific achievements that were sufficiently unprecedented and open-ended to attract an enduring group of adherents, and which became the foundation for future practice in a particular field (Kuhn 1996: 10). Although both Kuhn and the firewalk facilitators are dealing with fundamental beliefs about reality shared by a group of people, in experiential education and firewalking the sense of ‘community’ and what it means to ‘change’ those shared beliefs are quite different from the scientific revolutions that concerned Kuhn. It may be better to think of certain activities or experiences, whether scientific experiments or firewalking, as anomalies that cannot easily be explained within the dominant paradigm, which may lead to confusion and uncertainty but not necessarily a clear or coherent alternative (i.e. new paradigm).

<sup>77</sup> Goffman uses the term *front* to refer to standard ‘expressive equipment’ that “regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (Goffman 1990: 32). He makes a distinction between features of the *setting* (location, furniture, props, etc.), which tend to be associated with a specific place, and *personal front* (clothing, physical characteristics, facial expressions etc.), which are features of a specific person.



social performance because it allows people to *express* (or ‘project’) all those aspects of self-identity and reality that are not immediately apparent to an outside observer.

Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the ‘true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appear to be involuntary expressive behaviour.

(Goffman 1990: 13-14)

The idea that we all ‘play a part’ in society and may at times, for various reasons, intentionally ‘put on a show’ for the benefit of others is fairly straightforward and uncontroversial, and the vivid analogy that frames everyday interaction in terms of theatrical *performance* easily incorporates the concept of social *roles*; however, even the most ordinary, natural, habitual, unintentional or uncalculated activities and identities often demonstrate various “interactional constraints which play upon the individual and transform his activities into performances” (Goffman 1990: 72). Among other things, energy and attention originally focused on the activity itself tend to shift towards communication, creating a simplified or idealized impression by hiding certain facts and highlighting others – “Instead of merely doing his task and giving vent to his feelings, he will *express* the doing of his task and acceptably convey his feelings” (Goffman 1990: 72).

Implicit collaboration is apparent in the audience’s willing acceptance of the impression that is fostered before them, which may involve interpreting some events or activities as natural or conventional signs of something *real* or *true* but not directly observable through the senses (Goffman 1990: 14). During any social encounter individuals occupy both ‘actor’ and ‘audience’ positions – projecting information about their own identities, intentionally or otherwise, while simultaneously assessing other people on the basis of previous experience, sociocultural background knowledge, and the overall coherence of various observable characteristics (cf. Lakoff 1987; Evans & Green 2006; re: *idealized cognitive models*).

As members of an audience it is natural for us to feel that the impression the performer seeks to give maybe true or false, genuine or spurious, valid or phoney; [however,] if a performance is to come off, the witnesses by and large must be able to believe that the performers are sincere.

(Goffman 1990: 66, 77)

Individuals may fall anywhere along a continuum from sincere to cynical about the authenticity of their own performances, and frequently change positions during the process of socialization and adaptation to a new role or identity (Goffman 1990: 28); nevertheless, whether carefully calculated or unintentional, in a particular encounter an individual's initial projection commits him to *being* whatever he appears or claims to be, and requires him to drop all pretence of being something (or someone) else in that situation (Goffman 1990: 22). Modification and clarification of that initial assessment will naturally occur as more information emerges through interaction, "but it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up from, the initial positions taken by the several participants" (Goffman 1990: 22).

Although observers may be deliberately deceived or unwittingly fall victim to their own inaccurate assumptions, cultural stereotypes, and hasty generalizations, for the most part people seem to be able to negotiate a shared understanding of the situation and significance of other people's actions. In the interests of social harmony, "together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured" (Goffman 1990: 21).

Deliberate deception, ceremonial social conventions, and obvious attempts to create a certain impression are relatively easy to identify as examples of performance; the difficult part is learning to recognize the implicit acceptance of sophisticated and subtle social cues that sustain our shared sense of social reality:

When we observe a young American middle-class girl playing dumb for the benefit of her boyfriend, we are ready to point to items of guile and contrivance in her behaviour. But like herself, and her boyfriend, we accept as an unperformed fact that this performer is a young American middle-class girl. But surely here we neglect the greater part of the performance.

(Goffman 1990: 81)



THE 'PERFORMANCE TURN' WITHIN LINGUISTICS & DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Similar to the (in)famous 'linguistic turn' within the humanities and social sciences (Lemert & Branaman 1997: xv),<sup>78</sup> and the subsequent 'discourse turn' in language related research (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 4), recently scholars have noted a distinct 'turn' towards performance (or performativity) within linguistics, discourse analysis, and gender studies in particular, based largely on concepts from speech-act theory and the work of sociologists such as Goffman (e.g. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003; Cameron 1998; Butler 1990). Goffman suggests that status, social position, and various aspects of self-identity are not simply some inherent feature or quality that individuals *possess* and *display*; they are *realized* in interaction through coherent patterns of behaviour (Goffman 1990: 81). Both Butler and Cameron claim "that 'feminine' and 'masculine' are not what we *are*, nor traits we *have*, but effects produced by way of particular things we *do*" (Cameron 1998: 271, my emphasis; cf. Butler 1990). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet insist "that both language and gender are fundamentally embedded in social practice, deriving their meaning from the human activities in which they figure" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 5). Social practice involves motivated action and making choices within (or despite) various institutional or ideological constraints "that frame (but do not completely determine) those individual actions" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 5).

These aspects of social performance are relevant to my observations and analysis of empowerment across contexts because fear is often related to issues of self-identity and the desire to create a certain impression for other people – or – a direct result of being in a 'scary' or 'dangerous' situation. Genuine fear is often an invisible, internal, and individual experience; however, in this chapter I argue that fear – like gender – is not (only) something we *have*, but something we *do*. The uneasiness, anxiety, or sheer terror of one individual can only affect another person through its expression and dramatic realization in interaction; whether authentic or artificial, through performance it becomes real for the rest of the group, and this often involves language use. On the other hand, since fear is often based on a particular situational definition, it can also be challenged and redefined through language. Perceived risk

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<sup>78</sup> The word *turn* here (metaphorically) refers to a change in direction within the discipline or subject area as a whole, a general shift in theoretical orientation as an increasing number of scholars in a particular field adopt a more linguistic/discourse/performance based approach to analysis. I am not referring to conversational turn-taking, etc.

and other self-limiting interpretations of the immediate context may be individual (based on personal insecurities associated with self-identity, social role, or perceived category membership) or widely shared due to socialization, cultural background knowledge, and various commonsense assumptions about reality, but those beliefs can be challenged and transformed through social interaction.

### **Knowledge claims & collective representations**

An individual's beliefs about reality are significantly shaped by information from outside sources, and this collective background knowledge is socially constructed, shared, and sustained through interpersonal knowledge claims (Ristimaki 2006: 85). "Facts do not speak for themselves; it is only through social agents (who contextualize them in a way to correspond to their convictions) that the facts are permitted to speak" (paraphrase of Mey 2003 in Akman & Bazzanella 2003: 326). Theories of knowledge have historically focused on isolated individuals and internal cognitive processes, ignoring the *social* aspect of knowledge acquisition (Duran 1994: 8), and it is precisely because knowledge exchange and elaboration take place *through language* that pragmatics and discourse analysis can offer insight into the source of our shared sense of reality.

Although we often act as if everything we 'know' about the world is verifiably 'true' or self-evident, in practice this knowledge is all provisional and potentially open to instantaneous revision. In ordinary conversation we rely heavily on socially constructed belief systems to interpret and evaluate the knowledge claims of other people, and "what is taken to be justification in most contexts relies on implicit agreements between members of a community of knowers" (Duran 1994: xii). Obviously, we also acquire some knowledge through direct personal experience, but our sophisticated perceptual mechanisms are known to modify raw sensory input on the basis of Gestalt principles,<sup>79</sup> and we inevitably view reality through the lens of our own embodiment (Evans & Green 2006: 48, 65-68; cf. Jackendoff 1985: 24-26).

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<sup>79</sup> Gestalt principles refer to unconscious perceptual mechanisms that allow us to construct wholes (i.e. 'gestalts') out of incomplete perceptual input. Examples include: figure-ground segregation, which allows us to differentiate between an object and the background; the principles of proximity and similarity, which lead us to see elements that are closer together or similar in some way as a group; and the principles of closure and continuity, which lead us to complete shapes or patterns when part of the perceptual information is missing (see Evans & Green 2006: 65-68).



In addition, seeing typically involves categorization (Lakoff 1987: 126), and personal experience is often framed by other people in interaction or interpreted through a particular sociocultural worldview. As I have argued elsewhere (Ristimäki 2006: 91), worldviews transform information into *answers*. They allow us to put *everything* into context, framing (or distorting) our perception of the world, and they determine whether we accept or reject new information and experiences by filtering raw input (from our senses or the social knowledge claims of others) into categories that make sense.

As demonstrated and discussed in the previous chapters, framing affects interpretation, interaction, and experience – although participants often seem to be engaged in the same activity under virtually identical circumstances, due to different sense-making perspectives the participants in *any* interaction must collaborate in the negotiation of a shared interpretation of the immediate context (Dornelles & Garcez 2001: 1709; cf. Tannen & Wallat 1987). As routine patterns of behaviour are repeatedly performed and experienced in certain contexts they gradually become “institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotype expectations” they produce, and acquire additional meaning and stability as decontextualized collective representations (Goffman 1990: 37) or idealized cognitive models (Lakoff 1987). As a result, various identities, roles, and institutional relations are experienced as existing over and beyond the individuals themselves:

In other words, the institutions are now experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact. ...A world so regarded attains a firmness in consciousness; it becomes real in an ever more massive way and it can no longer be changed so easily.

(Berger & Luckman 2002: 45)

During social interaction, the emerging situational definition and provisional assessment of other people's roles and identities will be checked against other, more stable (long-term) structures of expectation and revised accordingly (Dornelles & Garcez 2001: 1709; cf. Tannen & Wallat 1987). Once again, the emphasis is on collaboration and creating (the impression of) a shared perspective. In terms of actually changing people's interpretation of context or beliefs about reality, my research and analysis has focused on framing rather than knowledge schemas because empowerment typically involves relatively brief encounters rather than

sustained interaction over a long period of time. As other scholars have argued, “more so than schemas, frames may be altered significantly during the course of a single conversation, often with considerable modification in the participants’ sense of what is going on, indeed, *in their sense of what is real or not*” (Dornelles & Garcez 2001: 1709; cf. Tannen & Wallat 1987; my emphasis). However, in this chapter it is important to consider the source of social background knowledge and shared beliefs about reality because this well-established conceptual framework or worldview is often the basis for participants’ ‘rational’ or ‘realistic’ fears and the self-limiting assumptions or identities that are ‘holding them back.’

#### WAYS OF BEING IN THE WORLD

Working from within a ‘rhetorical-responsive’ approach to social constructionism, Shotter observes that “speakers and listeners seem to be able to create and maintain ...an extensive background context of living and lived relations, within which they are sustained *as the kind of human beings they are*” (Shotter 1993: 12; my emphasis). Self-identities, social roles, and even apparently ‘natural’ categories like gender do not simply exist; they are continually being produced, reproduced, challenged and changed through projection, impression management, and social performance – “and language is the primary means through which we maintain or contest old meanings, and construct or resist new ones” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 4, 6). Reinforcing the core assertion of the ‘performance turn’ within the social sciences, and echoing Goffman’s observations about the American middle-class girl, Shotter argues that:

The ways of ‘being ordinary’ available to us in our society, are just as much socio-historical constructions as our ways of being a scientist, or a lover. In other words, not only do we constitute (make) and reconstitute (remake) our own social worlds, but we are also ourselves being made and remade by them in the process.

(Shotter 1993: 13)

This is where the clear distinction between real and imaginary realities begins to break down. In the first chapter I argued that, due to specialized knowledge and previous experience, the facilitators all seemed to have a privileged perspective on some aspects of the *real* world, promoting participation and empowerment while presupposing a shared sense of ‘objective’ reality. In the second chapter I showed how they also used language to prompt the creation of blended mental spaces and



convince participants to engage in activities based on *imaginary* scenarios, which created the conditions or incentive for increased communication and cooperation and led participants to develop various skills by behaving *as if* certain things were true. According to Goffman, people tend to evaluate the behaviour of others on the basis of two commonsense models of reality, which reflect a distinction between real and false performances (Goffman 1990: 77). Real, sincere, or honest performances are considered to be the unintentional product of an individual's 'natural' response to the objective 'facts' of the situation; whereas false or contrived performances are thought to be calculated and deliberate fabrications, which may or may not be taken seriously depending on the context and (assumed) motives of the participants (Goffman 1990: 77).<sup>80</sup> However, the boundaries become blurry in actual interaction because, as Lemert and Branaman suggest, "there is very little that goes on in daily life that is not, in some basic sense at least, a fabrication of what we imagine we ought to be or do in such and such a situation" (Lemert & Branaman 1997: xxxix; cf. Goffman 1974: 562).

WE ARE WHAT WE DO

"First, let it be said that there are many individuals who sincerely believe that the definition of the situation they habitually project is the *real* reality" (Goffman 1990: 77, my emphasis); however, these personal performances in everyday life are just as insubstantial as the imaginary characters and artificial scenarios involved in pretend play or live theatre. Much of what we 'know' about the 'real' world is based on inference, interpersonal knowledge claims, and the impressions projected by those around us, and to some extent everyone has the capacity to change who they *are* by modifying what they *do*.

We are what we do. During the course of our lifetimes, we constantly engage in some type of behaviour. It is our behaviour that defines what kind of people we are, whether we are productive or wasteful, kind or cruel, and wise or foolish. It is our behaviour that causes others to laugh or cry, to praise or blame us, and to love us or hate us. It is our behaviour that importantly determines whether we are successful or unsuccessful and whether we are happy or sad. Ultimately, our behaviour – how we act toward each other and toward the physical environment – will determine the fate of our species and of our planet.  
(Grant & Evans 1994: 1)

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<sup>80</sup> Stage acting and pretend play are examples of 'false' performances that are not meant to be taken seriously, which contrast with the equally artificial and deliberately deceptive performances of spies, undercover police officers, and con-artists.

People have the potential to create new character traits, shift into new social roles, develop or abandon relationships, and experiment with new identities through (calculated and deliberate or relatively unintentional) behavioural change. Simply highlighting the *imaginary* and *collaborative* nature of social constraints, which often rely on voluntary compliance, can be tremendously empowering for some people because it reveals ‘new’ options based on alternative interpretations of familiar social situations. Although some people may secretly feel as if they are still pretending, in some situations it is possible to ‘fake it till you make it’ – whether cynical or sincere about their own performances, if individuals can convince an audience to respond appropriately in interaction then we may say that the individual has effectively projected a particular self-impression or definition of the situation, and few observers will have any reason to doubt the ‘realness’ of what is presented (Goffman 1990: 18, 28). As we learn to perform our parts in everyday life we maintain an awareness of other people’s roles and routines, and when we successfully adapt to a new situation or social position “we are able to do this in part because of ‘anticipatory socialization,’ having already been schooled in the reality that is just coming to be real for us” (Goffman 1990: 79).

### **The social construction of reality**

The world of human existence does not exist independently of human activity, but is a product of that activity. In particular that world is constructed discursively. It is in the joint ‘conversational’ activity of multitudes of people that even the thoughts and feelings and projects of individuals come to be.

(Rom Harre, quoted in Shotter 1993: vii)

People’s beliefs about reality affect their perception of (im)possibility, which may lead to the creation of self-imposed limitations through voluntary compliance with various social norms and expectations. Individuals come into the world as children with no expectations or assumptions, and initially they rely on the knowledge claims of other people to provide a coherent interpretive frame for their lived experience – ideally, one that helps explain, among other things, where they are, why they exist, and what they should do here, which entails a general awareness of what the community as a whole believes to be *real*, *true*, and *possible*. “Children ‘inherit’ their humanity, then, in a process of communication which takes place after birth” (Shotter 1993: xiii), and for the children, since they had no part in shaping it, the



parentally transmitted world is opaque in places and analogous to the reality of the natural world (Berger & Luckman 2002: 45). Through the interpersonal process of social transmission it simply becomes *the* world, especially in childhood, and as we age this elaborate social performance gradually “loses its *playful* quality and becomes *serious*” (Berger & Luckman 2002: 45, my emphasis).

The distinction between ‘playful’ and ‘serious’ has emerged as a recurrent theme throughout my investigation into the pragmatics of empowerment, and what Berger and Luckman are highlighting here is the way we collaborate in the creation of our own constraints when we implicitly agree to take the social world *seriously*. Although Chafe (2001: 42) considers play inconsequential, it is also associated with the development of new skills and the freedom to experiment with new ideas or identities, explore alternative ways of being, and actively question or transform reality (Bateson [1972] 2000: 177-193; Beard & Wilson 2006: 137-138). On the other hand, stress, fear, and self-imposed limitations are often associated with taking our roles, our thoughts, our problems, and ourselves too seriously – and according to Jan Marshall, “not a shred of evidence exists that life is serious!” (Jeffers 2007: 75).

Socialization is like learning to participate in a complex social game based on a rich and detailed imaginary scenario that explains how the available roles and identities relate to each other, where the power lies and why, and what it means to succeed or fail. Life is the ultimate ‘problem-solving activity,’ similar to the Conway Centre examples discussed in the previous chapter, but on a much larger scale. Together, on this planet, we develop teamwork and communication skills by pursuing our individual and collective goals, competing or collaborating on various projects, and negotiating a shared understanding of the ‘rules’ as we go along. Actively participating in the process of social transmission simply strengthens our sense of historical/objective reality because the more often we say, “This is how these things are done,” the more likely we are to believe it and behave accordingly (Berger & Luckman 2002: 45-46). The more people that are involved the more *real* it becomes for all of us, because more minds need to be changed in order to effectively alter the ‘rules’ of the game; however, such change *is possible*, and historically there have been several examples in various parts of the world within the past hundred years

alone.<sup>81</sup> Regardless of how massive it may appear to the individual, the ‘objectivity’ of the world is a humanly produced, socially constructed objectivity (Berger & Luckman 2002: 46).

Men [and women] have created and are still creating the characteristics of their own humanity. ...Its development must be considered a historical, cultural one, a matter not of natural processes but of *human imagination*, choice and effort.

(Shotter 1993: xiii, my emphasis)

In claiming that reality is socially constructed I am not saying that it is completely arbitrary or all in our heads; the social world is real, but not in the same way as the natural world. Although we perceive (and therefore experience) a similar kind of stability and objectivity extending through time beyond the scale of our individual lives, this is due to widespread compliance and collaboration. Even those who occupy marginalized social positions or embody dissident roles and ‘alternative’ identities are still participating in essentially the same reality, resisting or trying to change ‘the system’ while performing valid and recognizable roles *within* it. They have no choice; a complete departure from reality is rarely an effective option. Since well-socialized individuals ‘know’ that their social world is a consistent whole, they are forced explain both its functioning and malfunctioning in terms of their knowledge about that society, and anyone who strays too far from the established norms or disregards certain fundamental ‘truths’ about reality is likely to be labelled ignorant, immoral, or mentally ill (Berger & Luckman 2002: 49).

The social world is ‘effectively’ real because we collectively behave *as if* it were real (cf. McHoul 2008: 825). We habitually *pretend* that our projected reality is actually the real world (Jackendoff 1985), and from a certain perspective even major social/political events such as the creation of a new country (e.g. the USA) through a declaration of independence can be seen as a particular group of people choosing to act *as if* certain things were true or legitimate (see Searle 1995: 118-119). However, “as numerous nationalist struggles in recent years indicate, declarations of independence need not be based on the consent of all involved; they may involve

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<sup>81</sup> For example, the civil rights movement in North America, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the creation of the European Union, all of which had an enormous effect on social and political reality and effectively changed the ‘rules of the game’ for large numbers of people.



competing claims to legitimacy, which may well be fiercely (and even militarily) contested by others” (Leezenburg 2002: 902).

In a sense we are all living in a blended mental space, or perhaps several simultaneously (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 83, 233). We interact with (real) people and our physical environment in a tangible way, but modify our own behaviour and interaction on the basis of beliefs, assumptions, and imperceptible features of ‘reality’ that are essentially imaginary. Examples include relying on indirect evidence to evaluate other people’s identities and emotional states, extending or projecting known social roles and routines into unrelated contexts, and voluntary compliance with social conventions, cultural taboos, and arbitrary legal systems. As a result, in many ways we are clearly ‘holding ourselves back,’ either individually or collectively – and often for very good reasons! The goal of personal empowerment is not to convince an individual that absolutely *anything* is possible, but to reintroduce a positive sense of personal choice and responsibility into behaviour and interaction in daily life, which allows people to explore new options and evaluate alternative responses for themselves.

It is all too easy to forget that ‘reality’ is little more than a proposition about the nature of things. One can live happily without ever questioning the proposition, but those who make it their business to ask such questions must eventually ask: Which reality?

(Lemert & Branaman 1997: xxxviii)

The examples in this chapter serve a dual purpose: Some demonstrate impression management and social performance in interaction, while others illustrate the remarkable way that clever facilitators can create an empowering sense of doubt and curiosity that allows participants to question some of their deeply held beliefs about reality. Participants at the Conway Centre are *performing* fear, and facilitators in the firewalking workshops are effectively *redefining* the perception and experience of fear – which both rely on implicit collaboration and the potential to influence another person’s mind through language use in social interaction.

## *Experiential Education*

### **The performance of fear**

*Fear* is not simply a subjective, internal, emotional state – in certain situations it becomes a public *performance*, which requires implicit audience collaboration and serves a variety of social (and perhaps psychological) functions. Genuine fear may trigger a wide range of involuntary reactions – from screaming to sudden silence, or from cringing to counter-attack – but the performance of fear is a more intentional and conscious choice to *express* one’s emotional or mental state for the benefit of other people. According to Goffman (1990: 40), “while in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure,” and each subject in the following examples is using language to create an external or public *awareness of fear*. By explicitly describing internal aspects of their personal experience, (whether real or not), these individuals are able to emphasize the relevance of these factors for an external audience, which subtly influences the observers’ perception or interpretation of the situation/activity and the individual’s identity/behaviour. Through the analysis I demonstrate that performing fear, like the interpersonal impression management involved in sustaining any other role or identity, serves a strategic function in social interaction.

The extracts in this section highlight the performance of fear and illustrate various aspects of impression management. The meaning of these utterances is not conveyed by the words alone, but is fundamentally pragmatic in the sense of negotiated meaning that develops through interaction, interpretation, and implicit collaboration in a specific social context: “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman 1990: 28), and *fear* can be ‘taken seriously’ in a number of different ways, depending on the (perceived) risks involved and the objectives of the activity.

These examples were obtained through participant observation and video recording of an adult group attempting the high ropes-course at the Conway Centre. In addition to the staff facilitator and me, the group consisted of five men in their early twenties that were participating in a trades-based apprenticeship program and their



'team leader'/current employer (A), who was approximately 20-30 years older than the rest of the group. In most of these examples the main participant (A) is interacting with an audience of fellow group members (Grp) from a safe yet somewhat precarious position (either 15ft. or 50ft. off the ground). He is wearing a full-body harness and is securely attached by rope to the rest of his team through a pulley high overhead; however, there is still enough slack/stretch in the rope that if he loses his balance or slips he will fall (and ideally his team will catch him before he hits the ground). As a result, expressions of fear or apprehension in this context are understandable and assumed to be 'real' in the sense that the participant is not joking or simply pretending to be scared; nevertheless, the most common response is what I refer to as sympathetic or supportive laughter, which reflects a shared interpretation of the situation and the fact that at some point each of the observers will also be in A's position. In the context of an experiential education centre there is a strong and explicit expectation on the part of everyone involved, including the participants themselves, that although these fears are *real* and difficult to deal with, they can and will be overcome. In fact, that's the whole point of the activity.

*MY BALANCE IS NOT TOO GOOD BOYS!*

*Context:* high ropes-course (15ft. catwalk).

*Objective:* to walk unsupported across a smooth log without falling off.

A: Whoa! [*nervous wobble*]  
Have you got another rope I can hold on to?... (5 sec.) (high voice)

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

---[cut]---

A: [*takes one step, then stops*]

A: D'y'know, I don' like the look of that one already – [= 50ft. catwalk]

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

---[cut]---

A: [*looks directly down at onlookers*] – My balance is not too good boys!

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !! – Go on! [*overlapping speakers*]

A: [*hesitates, and then walks carefully across without another word*]...

(Conway video)

The interaction in this example clearly illustrates impression management: The individual's personal perspective ("I don' like the look of that one") and subjective assessment/experience ("My balance is not too good boys!") are being intentionally externalized through language and public performance in order to create a particular interpersonal impression. The response from fellow group members is sympathetic or supportive laughter and encouragement – they are not mocking (A) for his

apprehension, but implicitly accepting the reality of his claims and playfully acknowledging that the *fear* is what makes this activity *fun* and challenging.

According to Chafe (2001), laughter is linked to the expression of an emotion that can be described as a pleasant or playful sensation of ‘nonseriousness,’ which is often (paradoxically) associated with awkward, confusing, or unpleasant experiences. Although this feeling of nonseriousness can be triggered by imaginary scenarios, “it is probably more often a real world that for some reason the speaker wants to avoid taking seriously or does not want others to take seriously” (Chafe 2001: 44). In all these examples, laughter can be seen as an attempt to acknowledge the real/genuine fear being (indirectly) expressed, but without taking it too seriously. More extreme forms of fear (i.e. panic) deserve to be taken ‘seriously’; however, in this context some of the unpleasant feelings associated with fear are meant to be experienced in order to be overcome, which is why they are linked to the expression of nonseriousness through laughter.

The next example includes both serious statements that externalize the participant’s private thought process and a more playful claim about his inability to move, which is another indirect expression and intentional performance of fear that triggers laughter in response from the rest of the group.

*I CAN’T LET GO!*

*Context:* high ropes-course (50ft. Catwalk) ~ Same participant and objective.

- A: [stamps his foot] – Dunno about my shoes... (4 sec.) (serious tone)  
 A: ffwaa... I don’ like the look of this at all. (serious tone)  
 A: [takes one step, but doesn’t let go of tree; quickly pulls back]  
 ---[cut]---  
 A: [looks straight down at the group] – aw, I can’t let go! (high voice)  
 Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
 C: You can do it (A), I’m // sure. //  
 B: //go on (A)! //  
 D: //Yeah, //  
 B: We’ve got you down here... (6 sec.)
- (Conway video)

In this example the participant’s doubts and private thought process are expressed in a *serious* voice (“Dunno about my shoes,” “I don’ like the look of this at all”);



however, claims like “I can’t let go” are said in a *playful* way and with a smile,<sup>82</sup> which indicates both A’s internal struggle and his desire to continue. This is not a literal statement or ‘serious’ belief about whether it can or cannot be done, but a way of eliciting support from the rest of the group. Although the challenge being faced is genuine, in this context it is collaboratively framed as ‘all part of the fun,’ and this interpretation is supported by the group’s response: more sympathetic laughter, reassurance, and encouragement. The staff facilitators also pay close attention to group dynamics during these activities, and although they permit supportive and sympathetic laughter they will immediately intervene if group members seem to be mocking each other in a negative way, and may explicitly instruct the group on how to respond appropriately to ‘serious’ displays of fear. For example, the following was overheard as a different group was preparing to enter the woods to attempt the high ropes-course:

Staff: Did anyone notice any body language there?

Grp: [*nodding*]

Staff: Yeah, twitching, holding breath, eyes poppin’ out a bit. All those, all those things are signs that somebody is probably challengin’ themselves quite a lot and they’re, they’re probably signs I think you should be looking out for in there so we can really support people. Y’know, the wrong thing at the wrong time can {*have a big effect*} on somebody who’s already stressed. If their eyes are popping out and they’re holding their breath, y’know, the joke of “oh the rope is gonna snap” is not always =

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

Staff: = it’s not got the same meaning as when you’re sort of all down on the ground chatting about it like this.

(Field notes)

These observations support my claim that there is a real and relevant distinction here between *playful* and *serious* expressions of fear in this context. Similar to claims like “I can’t let go,” which create the playful impression of (momentary) paralysis due to fear, additional aspects of the (stereotypical) physiological fear response may also be externalized and exaggerated through verbal description and social performance. Here are two examples of different participants, (A) and (B), each expressing imperceptible aspects of the fear response for the benefit of an audience.

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<sup>82</sup> Although I could see this participant’s smile, both in person and on camera afterward, as Chafe observes, “smiling affects the nature of the resulting sound, and generally it is possible to hear that people are smiling as they talk” (Chafe 2001: 38-39).

I CAN FEEL MY LEGS GOING ALREADY!

Context: high ropes-course (50ft. Catwalk) ~ same group.

B: [participant about to come down] – that’s a bit too much slack I think.  
 ---[cut]---  
 E: Off ya go, g’on! ... (6 sec.)  
 B: [deep breath + a big sigh = exaggerated; audible from the ground]  
 Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
 E: Go on!  
 D: Geronimo!  
 Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
 ---[cut]---  
 B: Shit. ...My knees are wobbling!  
 Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

Different participant:

A: [first step on the 50ft. catwalk] – Aw, d’y’know, this is high...  
 A: [glances down] – I can feel my legs going already  
 and I haven’t moved yet!

(Conway video)

As these examples illustrate, description and dialogue are central to the performance of fear. Utterances like “my knees are wobbling” and “I can feel my legs going already” are deliberately used to transform a personal experience into public knowledge, and clearly highlight relevant facts that might otherwise remain obscure (cf. Goffman 1990: 40). Although in some cases it may seem as if the participant is talking *to himself*, I would argue that because these comments are verbalized with enough volume to be intelligible up to 50ft. away they are actually being expressed for the benefit of others. Similar to Goffman’s (1981) work on self-addressed statements and response cries, I have noticed that participants often use sound effects in order to verbally express their emotions or help create a particular impression.<sup>83</sup> In the previous extract there was also an audible/exaggerated sigh, which was really nothing more than a deep breath with a lengthy pause before exhalation, but because it triggered a response from the audience I would consider this motivated interaction. As Goffman notes (1981: 137), we seek a response but not a specific reply; the intention is to be overheard, and the volume is adjusted so that everyone who can see the current situation will also hear our comment on it.

<sup>83</sup> Examples such as *aahh!*, *pfffttt!*, and *phew!* can be found in Appendix C: Conway video transcript.



Interaction with the audience allows both parties to converge on a similar perspective and mutually create the impression of a *shared* experience; even if the response is merely sympathetic laughter, through cooperative interaction the audience implicitly accepts the ‘reality’ of those internal experiences and evaluates the individual’s behaviour in terms of the apparent ‘facts’ of the situation. “For if the individual’s activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey” (Goffman 1990: 40), and although potentially real (or genuine) for the participant, for the rest of the group the fear and associated effects are essentially imaginary – based purely on indirect evidence, interpretation in context, and the overall coherence of the impression fostered before them.

### **Attitudinal intonation**

My subjective interpretations of intonation (i.e. serious, smiling, high voice, etc.), although imprecise, are relevant observations of interaction in this context. According to Wichman (2000: 144), “there is a long and honourable tradition in intonation research of providing attitudinal labels to explain the perceived, imagined, or predicted effect of intonational features used in a particular context”; however, these must be recognized as the researcher’s inferences and not necessarily implicatures intended by the speaker (Wichmann 2000: 147). Together with laughter, intonation helps convey (or create) a particular relationship between an individual and the content of an utterance (or the experience it describes). According to Crystal (1995: 249), “intonation’s most obvious role is to express attitudinal meaning – sarcasm, surprise, reserve, impatience, delight, shock, anger, interest, and thousands of other semantic nuances”; however, since much of the attitudinal meaning carried by an utterance depends on interpretation within a specific social context, perhaps ‘pragmatic nuances’ would be more appropriate. As far as the performance of fear is concerned, prosody seems to be quite salient in interaction; however, I have not attempted an analysis of it here due to insufficiently detailed data (i.e. poor/noisy audio recordings). Nevertheless, my personal observations provide some preliminary evidence that other group members perceive and respond to certain salient differences in utterance intonation. I cannot claim to know the speakers’ intended meanings or the subjective interpretations of other group members because “different people may make very different inferences from the

same interaction, depending on their beliefs about the nature of the context” (Wichmann 2000: 147). Nevertheless, these elusive aspects of intonation and attitudinal meaning are relevant and worth mentioning because they *do* affect interpretation and interaction (even if I cannot describe how), and they may be an interesting area of future research for somebody else.

The expression of fear (including verbal description of the physical fear response) is a speech act that serves a variety of social functions within the group, including the collaborative maintenance of a shared perspective or interpretation of context. In all these examples, the preferred response to the performance of fear seems to be sympathetic and supportive laughter, which acknowledges the real/genuine challenge of overcoming these unpleasant emotions, but in a playful and nonserious way. There is a semantic distinction in English between *laughing with* someone and *laughing at* them, and in this context the laughter I have observed is more characteristic of playful interaction and might be described as teasing rather than ridicule.

Teasing is a highly collaborative activity, where one person’s talk often builds directly on previous talk. ...In order for a teasing activity to remain playful the target of the teasing needs to respond in some non-serious manner. This can include an exaggerated denial or some other exaggerated response, such as extreme surprise. It can also include joining in on the teasing by mocking one’s self in some manner.

(Eder 1993: 21-22)

In some cases the exaggerated performance of fear can be understood as a playful form of self-mockery, which allows the individual to present themselves as the playful target/victim and focal point for group interaction while simultaneously expressing their (genuine) fear in a nonserious way. The following example illustrates an indirect expression of fear through playful teasing based on the employer/employee relationship between (A) and (B).



ANYTHING HAPPENS TO ME YOU'RE SACKED!

Context: high ropes-course (50ft. Catwalk) ~ same group.

A: Hold tight (B).

B: alright

C: a bit tighter yeah?

A: Anything happens to me you're sacked! (high voice)

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

(Conway video)

The playful 'threat' or 'warning' – "Anything happens to me you're sacked!" – highlights the most relevant social roles and power dynamics within this particular group, effectively making light of the situation while indirectly hinting at the fear and perceived risk through humour. A serious expression of concern or apprehension ("hold tight") is softened by playfully referring to social consequences rather than the potentially life-threatening physical consequences of an accident, and once again laughter from the rest of the group serves as interactional evidence of a nonserious interpretation of this utterance.

In addition to collaborative teasing and the cultivation of a shared interpretation of context, the expression and performance of fear also influences the interpretation of success or failure and the perception of accomplishment.

**The perception of accomplishment:**

One of the primary (social) functions of performing fear during these activities is to create a shared definition of the situation and introduce relevant facts that justify one's own behaviour; however, cultivating a shared (i.e. sympathetic) interpretation of fear and getting the group to respond with positive reinforcement also relies heavily on the initial framing and important interactional work done by facilitators, which has been discussed in previous chapters. For example, staff at the Conway Centre often explicitly redefine 'the point' or goal of intimidating activities (such as rock-climbing or the high ropes-course) in ways that allows participants to 'succeed' on several different levels, regardless of how well their peers perform on the same task, which allows participants to push themselves and 'step outside their comfort zones' without the need to compete with anybody else or feel like a failure in relation to others. Since one's individual 'comfort zone' is completely subjective and often imperceptible to others, the performance of fear and anxiety is one way to establish

the ‘reality’ of an internal struggle so that others will recognize the accomplishment when those personal barriers are ultimately overcome.

Activities that may be relatively easy for one person can be absolutely terrifying for another. Sometimes just going a few feet up on the ladder and looking down is a serious personal challenge, and some participants refuse to go any further despite encouragement from the staff or their peers. Exploiting the shared understanding that success is relative, individual participants can use the performance of fear to highlight their own achievements and create the perception of accomplishment by getting the audience to acknowledge the internal struggle that is taking place in these ‘scary’ situations.

PLEASE, I’M PROPER SCARED

*Context:* high ropes-course (15ft. Catwalk) ~ different group; M is a 14 year-old girl.

M: Can I just go up on the ladder?

Staff: Sure, you can do anything you want...

M: [*looks down from the top of the ladder*] – I’m not going...

Staff: C’mon, have a go... just hold on to the tree and try to stand there...

M: No.

Staff: C’mon...

M: [*She actually gets onto the catwalk, still holding tightly to the tree*]

M: I’m not moving! (serious but smiling) – !! *laughter* !!

Staff: C’mon, ...c’mon, just a little a step...

M: I can’t...

Staff: C’mon...

A: Can I come down now? – [*said without moving*]

Staff: Of course you can... just try to move a bit more into the middle...

A: I don’t want to.

A: Please ~ I’m proper scared... (pleading) – !! *laughter* !!

Staff: Ok.

(Field notes)

The impression that this participant is well outside her normal comfort zone is created by a combination of context, behaviour, and verbal interaction with a staff member. This is eventually articulated as being ‘proper scared,’ which presupposes and contrasts with other less intense or more constructive forms of fear. Although there is some laughter in this extract, it is not the same kind of collaborative



interaction previously discussed. Here the participant seems to be using laughter more as a personal coping mechanism, which I would describe as a ‘nervous laugh.’ In this case the fear is not fun (or funny) and the other group members maintain a ‘serious’ silence, which implies that the audience has accepted her performance as a genuine expression of her true internal/emotional state.

In the same way the performance of fear can justify poor performance or create a relative sense of ‘success,’ it can also be used to exaggerate or enhance the perceived challenge of a task – artificially building it up from something simple into a major personal accomplishment;<sup>84</sup> however, this cannot be done independently. In order to successfully create this impression the audience must implicitly accept the sincerity of the performance, because it’s hardly an achievement if you were only *pretending* to be scared!

As noted earlier, people have various motives for impression management and different degrees of belief in their own performances (Goffman 1990). There are plenty of reasons why someone might choose to ‘fake’ a performance of fear in interaction;<sup>85</sup> for example, it could be an effective method of gaining and retaining the undivided attention of specific people – holding the floor and prolonging one’s brief period in the spotlight by creating an apparent need for constant encouragement and support. During certain activities, the performance of fear and reluctance to participate may also have more to do with group dynamics than with actual fear. When used as a social test of the group’s cohesion and collective goals, it implicitly asks, “Am I a valuable member of this team too, or is it ok to just leave me behind?”

The performance of fear may also be a reflection of group dynamics in a broader context, imported social/gender roles, or an expression of self-identity within a

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<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, detailed description of scary situations that have been overcome in the past can also retroactively inflate the accomplishment in the eyes of others – particularly those who haven’t tried the task yet. During one of my first observation sessions I was with a group of six ‘troubled’ teenagers (14-16 years-old) that had been brought to the centre by two social workers: one woman in her early thirties and another in her mid fifties. The two women had both been on the high ropes-course several times with other groups, but they built-up their previous accomplishments so much by emphasizing the incredible fears they had overcome that several youth promptly declared “there’s no way I’m going up there!” before they even understood what the challenges involved.

<sup>85</sup> The performance itself is real, but not genuine; if the fear it’s allegedly based upon is not actually experienced it would be, in Goffman’s terminology, a ‘fabrication’ or ‘false’ performance.

particular peer group. Without previous knowledge of the participants or long-term observation of the group in multiple contexts it would be difficult (if not impossible) to disentangle these variables. In addition, the cause or function of fear in a specific context is not always as simple or straightforward as it initially appears; refusal to participate in an activity due to a relatively 'normal' or 'natural' fear may actually mask deeper, more embarrassing social insecurities. For example, I have seen boys (age 10-11) try to opt out of certain activities that involved holding hands with a girl by claiming to be 'too scared' of the task itself; however, they easily engaged in equally challenging tasks when paired up with a boy. On another occasion I observed two 14 year-old girls use an alleged 'fear of heights' to opt out of climbing a 15 foot wall; however, they were both large girls who may have actually been more insecure about the idea of being lifted by their peers and afraid they might turn out to be too heavy for anyone to lift. This interpretation was partially confirmed by their willing participation on the high ropes-course later the same day, but since one of the explicit goals of the session was to help people overcome their fears it is difficult to determine whether the original fear of heights was genuine or not.

### COME ON, BE A MAN!

As noted earlier, an argument can be made that gender itself is a social performance, and "it is also increasingly clear that while children and adolescents are aware of adult and societal expectations they do not completely determine their behaviour" (Eder 1993: 29). To a certain extent children are still learning the meaning and expectations associated with these roles or identities, experimenting with them in various contexts, and perhaps even redefining them in the process. "Gender is not part of one's essence, what one is, but an achievement, what one does... And gender practices are not only about establishing identities but also about managing social relations" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 305). The issues surrounding gender roles, interaction, and group dynamics are complex and multifaceted: Eckert has argued that "the difference between male and female group dynamics is ...based on differences in gender roles in society as a whole" (Eckert 1993: 33); however, other linguists have emphasized the way socialized 'gender' differences in conversational interaction are also affected by age, context, and group composition (Sheldon 1993; Eisikovits 1998; Cameron 1998). "Performing masculinity or femininity 'appropriately' cannot mean giving exactly the same performance regardless of the



circumstances. It may involve different strategies in mixed and single-sex company, in private and in public settings, in various social positions, [etc.]” (Cameron 1998: 281). Although the focus of my research is on the pragmatics of empowerment rather than gender roles specifically, the main reason I mention it here, in connection with the performance of fear, is to highlight the intricate web of variables that potentially affect interaction. In addition, it also helps explain why an 11 year-old girl would encourage one of her classmates to overcome his apprehension by saying, “Come on, be a man!”

### **Reframing fear in advance**

With the previous examples I have argued that some of the behaviour we associate with fear in social interaction is more than just a ‘natural’ reaction to inherently ‘scary’ situations; the performance of fear is often related to impression management and allows an individual to influence the perception and interpretation of other people by creating an awareness of relevant ‘facts’ that might otherwise be imperceptible to an observer. In this section I focus specifically on staff members’ pre-emptive framing of fear as a normal/natural emotional and physiological response. Since they lead these kinds of activities on a daily basis, the facilitators are able to anticipate participants’ anxiety and prepare them in a way that openly acknowledges and preserves the perceived risk but simultaneously serves to eliminate fear as an excuse for non-participation. In the context of an experiential education centre, flexible interpretations of fear allow staff members to adapt to different groups or individuals and help them understand the emotions or attitudes that seem to be holding them back – actively negotiating a shared perspective through language and interaction.

Research suggests that staff members at the Conway Centre have a fundamentally different perspective on the context and activities they lead compared to their participants (Airey 2000: 69). These people are specifically trained to deal with the dangerous aspects of the activities they lead – minimising actual risk while promoting an element of perceived risk – which means they tend to be more concerned with *learning* rather than simply *surviving* (Airey 2000: 69). In addition to their personal confidence and competence in this environment, they have also watched dozens (or perhaps even hundreds) of groups attempt these tasks and face

similar fears. More importantly, they have watched people of all ages and backgrounds *succeed*; they know without a doubt that these activities are (relatively) safe and possible for most people. As a result, facilitators often pre-emptively acknowledge people's fear and attempt to redefine or reinterpret it. This creates an environment where all participants, regardless of age or gender, can openly express their feelings of apprehension; however, it simultaneously allows them to objectify those emotions – creating conceptual distance between individuals and their own reactions and increasing agency in the face of fear. As the next example illustrates, facilitators are deliberately leading people into challenging situations that are outside their normal comfort zone, and although a little bit of fear is 'normal' and 'natural,' there is a strong expectation that ultimately it can (and should) be overcome.

EXPECT TO BE SCARED TODAY

*Context:* classroom, prior to travelling to abseiling site with a group of children.

*Staff:* We're going to be going out and abseiling down a cliff this afternoon, and if you're a little worried about that it's ok – even if you're not yet, expect to be scared today; so when you actually get there and see it you won't be surprised to feel a bit scared. That's normal and natural; but once you get past that and you sit back on the rope and realize 'hey, I'm still here, I haven't hit the floor or anything like that,' then it gets quite fun.

(Field notes)

This example illustrates how facilitators strategically attempt to alter people's perception of a 'scary' situation or intimidating activity by setting up shared expectations in advance and introducing a positive and empowering interpretive frame for these challenging emotions, which can potentially affect participants' experience and response to fear as well. If participants "expect to be scared" and still willingly accompany the group to the abseiling site then they have already implicitly agreed to face that fear and attempt the activity. Although they may still be scared and put on a sincere performance to express those feelings of stress, anxiety, or apprehension, the presupposition that they will "get past that" is already deeply embedded in the shared situational definition and underlying educational goals established by the facilitators. Since fear is normal and natural for *everyone* in this situation it no longer 'counts' as a valid excuse for non-participation. Participants are encouraged to openly express their apprehension or anxiety, but those feelings are strategically framed by facilitators in terms of excitement and the opportunity to overcome those personal challenges in a safe and supportive environment. The



implicit message is that there is nothing unique or exceptional about an individual's fear; everyone feels it at first, but it *can* be overcome, and "then it gets quite fun."

In addition to enhancing participants' perception of a 'safe' context through framing, staff members are able to use their context-based authority to establish new norms of interpretation for the group, which subtly redefine the 'appropriate' response to fear in this context – it's ok to feel a bit scared, everybody does, but it's not ok to let that stop you from trying the activity. Setting up these shared expectations in advance also allows participants to prepare themselves for the challenging emotional and physical reactions associated with fear. They know these activities are meant to be challenging, but because they trust the facilitator (or the equipment) and on some level 'know' (or agree) they are safe, they can experience the fear but take it a bit less seriously than an actual life-or-death situation. The difference between real risk and perceived risk is explicitly emphasized, and participants understand that the only real barriers holding them back are in their own body and mind. In the next example the facilitator focuses on the physiological fear response triggered by the catwalks on the high ropes-course, emphasizing that this is "a perfectly natural reaction" because "it *is* a scary activity."

YOU MIGHT GET A BIT TWITCHY ONCE YOU GET UP THERE

*Context:* classroom, prior to high ropes-course with a group of adults.

Staff: This'll be a bit of a challenge; you might get a bit twitchy once you get up there and get a bit of a scare. That's totally natural. That's a perfectly natural reaction...

---[cut]---

It *is* a scary activity. What we've done is remove the actual danger, by putting you in a harness, using good strong rope, and clipping you into these safety wires. But your body doesn't know that! You may end up having all kinds of internal arguments with yourself. You might have to convince yourself a bit that it's ok...

---[cut]---

But just thinking about it your palms might start to sweat, your heart beats a little faster... y'know, that's normal, you don't get that feeling everyday...

(Field notes)

In the first example ('expect to be scared') there was a subtle shift from *being* scared to *feeling* scared, which are two different ways of conceptualizing the internal (emotional) experience of fear. When fear is embodied or incorporated into one's self as a predicative complement – "I *am* scared" – there is less sense of agency

because fear is conceptualized as a ‘natural’ state, which is often the result of external circumstances.<sup>86</sup> “I *feel* scared” preserves the sense that it is personal and somewhat uncontrollable but places the subject in the role of experiencer, which highlights the subjectivity of emotions and creates a distinction between the individual and the emotional reaction. In contrast, the second example (‘you might get a bit twitchy’) focuses on the physical fear response, simultaneously shifting the source and changing the underlying concept of fear by framing the situation as “a scary activity.” In this way fear is implicitly defined as a general feature of the activity itself rather than something unique, internal, and individual. The emotion is externalized and objectified (EMOTIONS ARE OBJECTS) and causation is metaphorically understood in terms of PHYSICAL TRANSFER, so participants “might get a bit of a scare” *from* the activity. Although at first glance these linguistic differences may seem trivial, these different ways of talking about fear arguably reflect different interpretations (or cognitive/conceptual models) of where fear comes from and how it relates to the individual; therefore, modifying the metaphors and prompting new mental-space mappings in interaction can effectively redefine participants’ relationship to fear and give them additional conceptual resources for dealing with it in positive and empowering ways, (whether they recognize it meta-cognitively or not):<sup>87</sup>

One way of understanding the source of these subtle differences in interpretation is to think of language as prompting certain connections in mental space between different domains, which each activate an entire network of related concepts and ideas. ‘I am scared’ creates a meaningful connection between the domain associated with the ego/self-concept or general states of being and the domain of fear, while ‘I feel scared’ activates a conceptual network associated with feelings and emotions, leading to a more visceral sense of fear.<sup>88</sup> As a context-specific state of being fear is highly personal and associated with a specific individual at a particular point in time;

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<sup>86</sup> Similar to ‘I am hungry/tired/angry’ (in English), but this analysis does not apply to all languages.

<sup>87</sup> There are parallels to this in the linguistics literature on conceptual metaphors related to health and illness. For example, there are subtle conceptual differences between “I *have* diabetes,” “I *suffer* from diabetes,” and “I *am* a diabetic”: The first reflects the conceptual metaphor DISEASES ARE OBJECTS and characterizes the illness as a separate entity that is either possessed by or inflicted upon the individual; the second expression presents the person as an *experiencer* of illness; and the third actually incorporates diabetes into their concept of self (Fleischman 2003: 491; Ristimaki 2005).

<sup>88</sup> I am grateful to Professor Vyv Evans for a conversation that helped me clarify my own understanding and expression of this idea, (personal communication April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008).



however, as an emotion fear is more universal and, similar to other emotions, it is often considered ‘contagious,’ comes in degrees, and is not under voluntary control (cf. Chafe 2001: 39). As a feature of external situations, events, or activities, fear is something people encounter in the world and can choose to face or flee. It can be planned and prepared for, resisted or embraced, and avoided or overcome. Changing the linguistic prompts affects the entire network of associations, including the potential for change and the kind of response that ‘makes sense.’

In the second example above, the facilitator builds on previous framing of the safety equipment and the idea of real vs. perceived risk to introduce a meaningful distinction between body and mind. Although the body is associated with automatic reactions and the physical fear response, the mind is associated with rationality and conscious choice, and the claim that facilitators have “removed the *actual* danger” but preserved or increased the perception of danger, implies that participants cannot trust their own senses or ‘natural’ instincts. Rationally, intellectually, you may understand all the safety systems that are in place to protect you, yet somehow “your body doesn’t know that.” Conceptually, this internal duality allows participants to disassociate themselves from the physical fear response within their own bodies, which creates new options for dealing with it: For example, “you may end up having all kinds of internal arguments with yourself. You might have to convince yourself a bit that it’s ok.” It does not require a radical shift in worldview or self-identity to understand the idea of internal arguments and convincing yourself, but this dialogue is essentially imaginary and requires implicitly accepting that this kind of thing is possible and potentially effective.

Although fear is acknowledged, it has lost some of its power over the individual because it is conceptualized as merely one component of a complex situation rather than an all-encompassing natural state. The physical fear response has been linked to *misperception* of the situation, which suggests that the actual source of those emotions is not only external but also essentially false, and therefore rationality, willpower, and conscious choice can overcome the body’s physical resistance through imaginative internal arguments. This idea is introduced more directly and explicitly in the examples from various firewalking workshops that are discussed in

the next section, which demonstrate how facilitators actively deconstruct and redefine participants' concepts/experience of fear.

### *Firewalking*

Fear and firewalking are fundamentally linked. It is not an impartial sense of impossibility, but an embodied fear of being burned that makes firewalking so fascinating. Given the opportunity and appropriate instruction, there are countless reasons why people choose to walk on fire, but ultimately, only one reason why they don't – according to facilitators, fear is what prevents people from even entertaining the idea or stops them from taking the first step. The examples discussed in this section illustrate the inherent connection between fire and fear, which facilitators exploit in order to create a more empowering interpretation of a particular experience (i.e. firewalking). In addition to (metaphorically) putting your fears *into* the fire and walking *through* your fear (discussed in the previous chapter), the activities and interaction analysed in this chapter demonstrate how facilitators can effectively redefine participants' understanding and experience of fear during these seminars, leading them to attempt and achieve things they previously considered impossible. Through language they also enhance the activity itself in various ways that encourage participants to interpret their experience as 'proof' of some new insight into reality or fundamental truth about fear in general. Towards the end of the chapter I demonstrate that participants seem to draw on the dominant metaphors and interpretive framework promoted by facilitators in order to make sense of their personal experience, and I offer some indirect evidence of a potential 'paradigm shift' or dramatic change in participants' commonsense assumptions about reality as a result of these activities.

#### **Fear is the fundamental obstacle to overcome**

Despite the enormous range of motives and methods, there is one theme that comes up consistently in every empowerment workshop, human potential seminar, and charity fund-raiser that involves a firewalk – it's not about facing the fire, it's about facing the *fear*.



Q: *Why should I do it?*

...To confront fear. Fear in all its guises creates the limits that we surround ourselves with. Fear is the fundamental obstacle that we all have to overcome in our quest for growth and development.

(Mental Combat website)

People often ask me, why walk on fire? What does it prove? And I tell them it doesn't prove a thing. All sorts of people walk on fire, for a variety of reasons. The majority of them have one thing in common – they are afraid, and do not want fear to dictate their lives any longer.

(Napolitano 1993)

Somewhat paradoxically, fear is not only presented as the primary reason to participate in a firewalking workshop, but also the reason people choose *not* to participate in the activity itself. The (shared) experience of fear and its (negative) influence on daily life is what brings all these people from different backgrounds together, yet it also represents a personal barrier to overcome.

What stops us from walking in the first place? It's fear – because a lot of people have said they were going to come along tonight, but they've dropped out with one excuse *{out of a thousand other reasons we know}* but it all boils down to fear at the end of the day. They're scared to do it. But scared doesn't *{have to cause}* a problem. You have fear for a reason normally, it's there to protect us.

(Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video)

As noted earlier, fire burns, so fear is a genuine and justified psychological reaction and pain is a real physical sensation, which most people have been taught or conditioned to avoid; however, in this context being scared doesn't have to cause a problem because facing that fear is the whole point of the activity. Similar to the way facilitators at the Conway Centre framed fear before activities like abseiling, in these examples fear is framed as common and universal rather than unique or exceptional. It is normal, natural, and unsurprising in this context and participants' fear of fire – or more precisely, their fear of pain and burning – is not dismissed as silly or irrelevant, but acknowledged as a valid, reasonable, and perfectly realistic response. Nevertheless, there is still a strong expectation that it can (and should) be overcome.

Firewalking is the focal point of Tony Robbins' *Fear into Power* seminars (Sternfield 1992: 24-25), and according to Ray Napolitano, another American firewalk facilitator, "true courage is not the absence of fear, but learning to act in the

presence of fear” (Napolitano 1993). The point of participating in a firewalking workshop is not to change the way you relate to *fire* but to change the way you relate to *fear*. Rather than ignoring the (perception of) danger or trying to eliminate fear entirely, the point of these seminars is to change the way people interpret fear, allowing them to consciously assess the risk and respond intentionally rather than react automatically – essentially, to feel the fear and do it anyway.<sup>89</sup>

### **Actively redefining fear**

One way to change participants’ perception and response to fear is to focus on the physical sensations associated with anxiety and strategically reframe them as signs of ‘excitement’ or ‘anticipation.’ The following illustrative example is from a video of one of Tolly Burkan’s American firewalking seminars (described in Sternfield 1992). At one point the participants are told that no one will be allowed to come outside, even to watch, unless they’ve rolled up their trouser legs and taken off their shoes and socks; as they do that, the facilitator says the following:

#### YOU DON'T HAVE TO EXPERIENCE IT AS FEAR

Notice what’s going on in your body right now. When you go outside, this sensation might still be in your body. But you don’t have to experience it as fear.

(Tolly Burkan, quoted in Sternfield 1992: 49)

Fear is still a perfectly normal and natural part of this activity, so the facilitator does not directly challenge or contradict participants’ initial interpretation of their internal/emotional experience – which may or may not be fear, and is ultimately unknown – but presupposes there will be something going on inside at that moment and highlights the option of assigning that emotion some other label. It’s often context, the assumed consequences, and a subjective sense of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ that determines the difference between fear and excitement. When we ‘know’ that we are safe or realize our senses have been deceived by an illusion then fear can actually become a source of excitement, and we interpret the physical response of our bodies in a more positive way. By drawing attention to the internal sensations being (predictably) triggered in this moment and suggesting the idea that this is not

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<sup>89</sup> *Feel the fear and do it anyway* is the title of a well-known book by psychologist and self-help guru Susan Jeffers ([1987] 2007) that quickly became an international best-seller.



necessarily fear, the facilitator is using language and context-based authority to introduce a more empowering interpretation of subjective experience.

This is remarkable because in most situations individuals are considered the authority on their own internal experience – they alone sense it directly; the rest of us can only infer their emotions, sensations, and subjective state of mind/being on the basis of an external impression. However, here the facilitator is able to strategically create a sense of doubt surrounding the meaning of these feelings and/or physical reactions, and redefining ‘fear’ as ‘adrenaline,’ ‘excitement’ or ‘alert awareness’ changes the network of associations and activates a different set of mental models, which can potentially reveal new options, including alternative responses to these awkward or uncomfortable feelings. Rather than explicitly imposing an alternative label on participants’ subjective experience, which could easily be denied or argued against, the facilitator merely suggests that it doesn’t *have to* be experienced *as* fear – thus, the reality of the experience itself is validated, but the (negative/disempowering) interpretation is subtly undermined and participants are left to imagine for themselves what else this sensation might be. Rather than simply ignoring (potential) apprehension or anxiety, this approach allows facilitators to exploit those powerful feelings by weaving them into a network of positive associations, and since all the participants presumably *want* to walk on fire they are motivated to collaborate in this process. The physical sensations associated with fear have not been eliminated or even resisted, but focused upon and actively redefined as a different kind of experience.

Another approach is to undermine the concept of fear in general by highlighting misperception of the situation. Similar to the emphasis on perceived risk previously discussed in relation to activities at the Conway Centre, during the firewalking seminars I have studied the facilitators often explicitly redefine (the word/concept) ‘fear’ in order to create an empowering sense of doubt around the commonsense assumptions many of our ‘natural’ fears are based upon.

F.E.A.R – FALSE EVIDENCE APPEARING REAL

Because we can have phobias, we can be scared of heights, we can be scared of... snakes, spiders.. scared of the dark, scared of small places, but what we need to understand about fear.. is it's normally pretty illogical. 'Cause look, a lot of people are scared of snakes but have never even seen a snake, touched a snake, or even been close to a snake, but they're petrified of them.

So what is fear? F.E.A.R is *False Evidence Appearing Real*.

As I said for the snake, for whatever reason we've got that innate fear in us, but it's false because we've never touched one. We tend to think that snakes are slimy, they're not, they're really smooth and dry. But the false evidence appears real to us so it's a genuine fear. It's genuine to be scared of it. Now what we need to do, is see this false bit, we need to get rid of it, 'cause a lot of things are false. So we need to understand what the false is.

(Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video)

I first encountered the acronym F.E.A.R as a firewalk participant at Quantum Leaps Lodge in Canada, but later recognized the same strategy being used almost word for word in videotaped seminars from the UK and USA as well. Rather than 'false evidence,' an alternative reading of F.E.A.R is *False Education that Appears Real* (Sternfield 1992: 30). During each of these workshops the concept of fear is reinterpreted in almost exactly the same way, and the idea can be illustrated with anything from simple stage magic and sleight of hand (Sternfield 1992: 47) to more extreme examples such as the arrow-breaking exercise discussed below. Note that participants' natural fear response, which is "normally ...there to protect us," is now being reframed as "normally pretty illogical" (Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video). The feeling or emotion itself is acknowledged as a real or genuine fear – "it's genuine to be scared of it" – but the perception or evidence it's based upon is framed as false. Although this activity is firmly grounded in the real world, in the sense that participants are not hallucinating, playing, or pretending to walk on fire, the underlying message is that participants need to question their own assumptions about reality because those self-limiting beliefs may be holding them back and preventing them from realizing their full potential. In contrast to the problem-solving activities at the Conway Centre, rather than using an imaginary scenario to create artificial rules, hazards, or incentives in order to influence participants' behaviour, the firewalk facilitators strategically undermine participants' commonsense beliefs about reality and suggest that much of the 'danger' we have learned to respond to in everyday life is equally artificial. In the words of Tolly Burkan, "so often you go



through life thinking you understand what's going on here, and so much of what you call reality is just an illusion" (Sternfield 1992: 47).

Participants are led to doubt their 'natural' perception of the situation by various activities and examples that highlight how often 'false evidence' really does appear real to us. Facilitators exploit this mismatch between perception and 'reality' (for lack of a better word) in interaction to strategically enhance the sense of challenge, awe, and accomplishment – or, alternatively, to reduce participants' genuine fear and preoccupation with any real risks involved in the activity. If it were merely a trance or delusional misperception of the 'facts' that convinced people to walk on red-hot coals then the potential to trigger empowerment in other contexts would be limited; however, systematically deconstructing the basis of fear within participants' existing belief systems creates an exciting awareness of untested assumptions and untapped potential in everyday life. Rather than simply telling participants their current beliefs about reality are inaccurate, facilitators demonstrate 'false evidence appearing real' and frame the firewalk itself as undeniable 'proof' that participants are capable of far more than they previously expected or imagined.

### **The arrow-breaking exercise**

*False evidence appearing real* (F.E.A.R.) can be effectively illustrated in a number of different ways. Some facilitators use simple stage-magic to highlight misperception with entertaining illusions, while others focus on the physical limitations of our natural sensory system in order to emphasize the fact that the world we habitually see, sense, and experience is not all that exists. Once participants accept that our embodied view of the world is partial and provisional, it is relatively easy for facilitators to introduce the idea that other options exist and suggest that people can develop or discover abilities they did not know they had. However, the illusions and illustrative examples are merely the preliminary framing for a more direct and tangible experience of fear based on false evidence.

The most powerful personal example of F.E.A.R I have come across is an arrow-breaking exercise that I first experienced at Quantum Leaps Lodge: Each participant was given a standard wooden archery arrow and told to place the bullet-shaped metal tip directly into the soft hollow at the base of their throat, between the collar bones.

Then, with a partner or facilitator bracing the other end, participants were told to step forward calmly but decisively, confidently pushing the arrow into their throat until it bent and snapped in half. Personally, I found this exercise just as meaningful and awe-inspiring as the actual firewalk because it directly challenged my commonsense beliefs about arrows and my own throat, clearly illustrating a ‘realistic’ yet ultimately unnecessary fear of physical injury. Psychologically, this is not an easy exercise to do because it involves a ‘dangerous’ object and a ‘vulnerable’ part of the body, but it is undeniably possible for most people.<sup>90</sup> Once accomplished, that experience serves as direct evidence that fear is not necessarily based on reality, and despite the intense emotions and internal struggle it can be overcome by conscious choice. In addition to my own experience at Quantum Leaps Lodge, I have found variations of the same exercise being used in the seminars run by UK Firewalk and Mental Combat as well, and observations from all three sources are discussed below.

In the video I obtained from UK Firewalk the seminar begins in a classroom with a power-point slideshow, and the arrow-breaking exercise is introduced and explicitly framed in terms of false evidence. The digital image on the screen shows a woman bending an arrow by pushing against it with her throat, and the title reads: “If you believe you can you can, if you don’t you won’t!”

*YOU JUST WOULDN’T DO IT, WOULD YOU?*

So what I’m going to now show you, is something of F.E.A.R. False Evidence Appearing Real. I’ve got a picture there of Diane, and she’s got an arrow in her throat there. There’s two pictures I’ve got, one’s straight, but this is the one where it’s just about to snap. But it’s pretty illogical to think, when your windpipe’s *{up against}* a pointed arrow, you just wouldn’t do it, would you? It’s nonsensical.

I’m pretty logical, I’ve seen arrows go into things and kill things. I’ve got a genuine fear there. That’s my windpipe. I don’t like anything on my windpipe ‘cause I like to breathe through there. I’m going to show you how to snap an arrow, and how it is false evidence, because after that you’ll know anyone can put an arrow on their throat and snap it if they want.

(Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video)

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<sup>90</sup> Following my initial experience of the arrow-breaking exercise I began to wonder if special arrows were required or if an altered state of consciousness was involved in the firewalking seminar, so I ordered some arrows of my own and did it again. I have now personally done this exercise at least half a dozen times, in various contexts, and led over 20 other people to successfully do it as well, including my supervisor, Professor Jenny Thomas, and 10 random volunteers from an audience of undergraduate students at a public presentation of this research.



Here the facilitator is explicitly highlighting the (assumed) sense-making process, with an emphasis on logic and rational decisions based on background knowledge and previous experience. It's illogical and nonsensical to put your windpipe up against a pointed arrow; arrows are designed to puncture and kill things, and the throat is a particularly vulnerable point. This is all 'common sense' based on categorization and encyclopaedic background knowledge of the world, which is presumably shared and implicitly accepted by all participants. The fear of pain and physical harm associated with this activity is genuine (just like the fear of fire) – it is considered logical and makes perfect sense to most people – however, the whole point of highlighting these shared assumptions about reality is to shatter them. Demonstrating that genuine fear can be based on false evidence creates an empowering sense of uncertainty and possibility, which helps lead people to a place where 'realistically' walking safely across a bed of red-hot coals begins to make sense.

Immediately following the previous extract the facilitator pulls out an arrow and passes it around, asking the participants to confirm that it's a "proper archery arrow" – that is to say, "there's no cuts or bends in it; it's got a reasonably sharp metal end on it" etc. (Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video). He then places the tip against his throat, rests the other end against a wall, and calmly walks straight into it. The most striking aspect of this particular demonstration is how quick and simple it is. There is no elaborate ritual or hypnotic trance – he simply snaps the arrow: "I'm just walking into it; no tricks, no nothing. Just your self-belief that putting it on there will not kill me" (Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video). Although he makes it seem as natural and effortless as snapping your fingers, when he asks if anyone else would like to have a go the students all seem quite cautious and reluctant – the activity is optional, and in the video only one person volunteers out of approximately 20 adults present.

Perhaps simply seeing it done is not enough to alter the perception of possibility and override self-limiting beliefs because we know that our senses are not always accurate and we find it easier to trust a lifetime of background knowledge and accumulated ideas about the world than a single surprising counter-example. I believe this is why I have not come across any examples of completely silent

firewalking seminars – the activity itself may be possible without words, but language facilitates the integration of that example or experience into an existing worldview, which allows the individual to understand that this is something they can do as well, and creates a deeper sense of meaning or significance that allows (the memory of) this activity to justify a different understanding of fear in general. The discussion of F.E.A.R. and the arrow-breaking exercise are stepping stones that help establish a ‘realistic’ conceptual space in which firewalking makes sense, and the experience of facing a genuine fear safely and successfully justifies positive expectations that walking barefoot on hot coals will turn out to be possible as well. Firewalking and the arrow-breaking exercise are *possible* regardless of how they are framed; however, framing the activity in terms of reality (i.e. real risks and serious consequences) rather than illusion, imagination, or pretend play can affect participants’ behaviour and understanding of why it works, leading to different interpretations (and implications) of that experience.

#### FRAMING, RITUAL, & PERFORMANCE

Language does not directly determine whether or not something is possible, but it can prompt people to create imaginative mental spaces that influence interpretation and interaction in ways that make it possible *for them*. Language can change the way an event or activity is conceptualized, which affects the perception of (im)possibility and the way people make sense of that experience. The arrow-breaking exercise is an effective way to expose unexpected gaps in participants’ otherwise coherent worldviews, which forces them to question other fears, assumptions, and self-imposed limitations. However, through language the basic exercise can be deliberately embellished in various ways to encourage participation, offer a more mystical or metaphysical explanation, and enhance the sense of risk, awe, and wonder.

In the firewalking workshop I attended at Quantum Leaps Lodge the discussion leading up to the arrow-breaking exercise included references to mind-over-matter, the F.E.A.R acronym, focusing energy in the throat chakra, and the importance of clear intention and decisive action. The actual possibility of breaking the arrow was never in question, and the danger of pushing an arrow through your own throat was casually dismissed as illusion – the emphasis was on consciously choosing to move



forward despite the fear. Even after watching others do it, I still found it difficult to understand or believe in and I became acutely aware of my own internal struggle to make sense of this new possibility; however, eventually the doubts dropped away and I chose to step forward.<sup>91</sup> In our group of 15 almost everybody succeeded in snapping the arrow; one woman chose to break it over her knee (for undisclosed personal reasons), and another successfully bent the arrow into an arc but couldn't convince herself to take the final step and snap it. None of the participants were injured by this activity, and everyone who succeeded seemed to be left with a deep sense of awe and was encouraged to keep the broken arrow as a tangible reminder of overcoming F.E.A.R.

In the UK Firewalk seminar with Scott Bell (discussed above) this arrow-breaking exercise is presented as perfectly safe and unexceptional: "I'm just walking into it; no tricks, no nothing" (Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video). At Quantum Leaps Lodge the activity is also assumed to be safe, but a few optional internal strategies are suggested to help put participants in the 'right' state of mind – focussing energy in the throat chakra isn't strictly necessary, but if you already believe in that kind of thing then it might help. In contrast, when the same exercise is done as part of a Mental Combat firewalking workshop it involves deep breathing, large synchronized body movements, and rhythmic chanting by the rest of the group (Mental Combat video). This is not the performance of fear, but the performance of intense focus on an individual level and collective encouragement and support from the rest of the group. This highly collaborative and interactive ritual allows the audience to actively participate rather than passively observe, so it may enhance the perception of a shared experience and heighten the sense of wonder surrounding this accomplishment; however, it also creates the impression that successfully snapping arrows with your throat requires a special trance-like state, which may ultimately be less empowering for the individuals involved since they cannot recreate it on their own in other contexts.<sup>92</sup> Each approach is effective, and I believe a certain amount

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<sup>91</sup> My initial success did not eliminate the doubts or fear entirely. My apprehension persisted in various forms until I had successfully snapped several more arrows on my own in other contexts, and it may still come back again. Nevertheless, the memory of successfully overcoming that fear gave me the motivation/confidence to face it again.

<sup>92</sup> This particular approach may also be due to the facilitators' background and training in hypnosis and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which they offer in separate specialized courses (Mental Combat website).

of suggestive framing and ceremony can add a sense of seriousness to the activity that makes it more meaningful for participants; however, through social performance and the collaborative negotiation of context different facilitators can demonstrate 'the same' activity yet lead participants to fundamentally different interpretations of that experience. While some choose to frame the arrow-breaking exercise and firewalk in terms of false evidence and natural ability, others may be more concerned with creating the impression of a specialized context, valuable instruction, and essential interactive rituals, which not only enhance the subjective sense of awe and accomplishment but also help justify the fees paid for professional facilitation. Although the end result may appear the same, the different interpretations and explanations are important because they affect the way people make sense of these new experiences, which in turn contributes to reasoning and becomes the basis for future responses to fear and new choices in other contexts.

### **Firewalk comparison & contrast**

The differences in framing and ritual discussed (above) in relation to the arrow-breaking exercise also extend to the firewalk itself. Is this activity ordinary or extraordinary? Apparently most of us can do it, yet crossing the coals unharmed isn't guaranteed and it still isn't common enough to be considered completely 'normal' or 'natural' in relation to everyday life. Even within my limited range of experience there seems to be incredible diversity in the context and preparations that make it possible to safely engage in this activity, and the most striking observation has been how *different* all these firewalking workshops are. The participants each have their own individual motives, and the facilitators often offer multiple explanations for why it works and what it means in terms of fear, empowerment, and life in general. According to Terri Ann Laws and the team at Mental Combat, "you don't have to meditate on a mountain-top for seven years to firewalk in safety. It's simply that most people are unaware of the enormous power that they have internally"; nevertheless, they still claim to provide "ideal conditions for walking" (Mental Combat website). Empowerment aside, all professional firewalk instructors have a vested interest in creating a specialized sense of context in order to justify the need for 'expert' facilitation; however, this unique event or activity can take a variety of different forms.



DANCING WITH THE FIRE (MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE)

For example, my personal firewalking experience took place outdoors on the eve of the equinox (September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006), in an easily accessible but relatively remote valley in the Canadian Rockies. We built the fire ourselves next to a glacier-fed river filled with spawning salmon, and the workshop was conducted in a large tepee nearby.<sup>93</sup> From beginning to end it was an exciting yet solemn affair, with a strong emphasis on introspection and quiet personal reflection, and this somewhat surreal/spiritual atmosphere was naturally enhanced by the silence, solitude, and the jagged silhouette of the mountains against a clear star-filled sky and the shimmering green spectre of the northern lights. The 15 participants each paid \$50 (CND) for a three and a half hour ritual/workshop referred to as “Dancing with the Fire,” which included various other activities (like board and arrow breaking, as previously discussed) that were meant to help us “explore the nature of personal and shared reality, while learning to transform fear and limiting beliefs [and] let go of what stops us from being 100% in life” (Quantum Leaps Lodge website).

The entire evening was explicitly framed as “an opportunity for a conscious paradigm shift; a chance to consciously change your own belief system” (field notes), and our facilitator, Brian Olynek, adopted a very humble approach. Rather than highlighting his own specialized knowledge and experience, he suggested that the fire itself is the teacher:<sup>94</sup> “You don’t have to agree with everything I say. If it doesn’t make sense or you think it’s all bullshit, just set it aside. Maybe it’ll make sense later – or maybe it *is* all bullshit” (field notes). Surprisingly, there was nothing mystical, magical, or miraculous about the ability to walk on fire; it was presented as a perfectly normal and natural thing to do – just another option we’re free to choose, and an equally ‘realistic’ alternative to the pain and fear we often associate with fire. The ‘rituals’ of the workshop were so simple that there was never any sense of psychological conditioning or mass hypnosis, although arguably we may have willingly or inadvertently put ourselves into an altered state of consciousness. At least one participant seemed slightly surprised when the time for firewalking actually

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<sup>93</sup> A tent or wigwam of the American Indians, formed of bark, mats, skins, or canvas stretched over a frame of poles converging to and fastened together at the top (Oxford English Dictionary: tepee).

<sup>94</sup> This idea was also expressed in the Napolitano video (1993), and could be seen as a variation on Woodsworth’s motto: “Let Nature be your teacher,” which reflects the *nature as measure* metaphor (see Verhagen 2008: 10).

arrived, and upon brief introspection said, “I was anticipating more... anticipation” (personal communication/field notes).

Although the exact temperature of the coal-bed is unknown, we were told that temperatures often exceed 1200° F. This is considered the minimum and is allegedly hot enough to cast engine blocks for automobiles (field notes; Napolitano 1993). Regardless of whether this is accurate or not, from a participant’s perspective the fire seemed undeniably hot enough to burn flesh. The facilitator was the first to walk, and he did so casually, with a calm smile on his face, and we each followed his example – first in one direction to leave any doubts, fears, and insecurities behind, and then back across in the other direction for personal empowerment, in order to invite healing, confidence, and various other positive qualities into our lives. Every participant successfully crossed the coal-bed and most walked at least twice; some people chose to walk four or five times. Some people took each step slowly and deliberately, with a sense of curiosity and wonder, while others seemed to rush a bit and obviously still had some fear to overcome.<sup>95</sup> At the time it wasn’t important to understand why it worked – the experience effectively silenced the mind – and afterwards we were left to process and ponder the implications: What does this *mean*? If this is possible, what else?

#### COME ON BABY, LIGHT MY FIRE

In contrast to my own experience, in the video from UK Firewalk there seems to be a lot less introspection and much more excitement surrounding the event, which I believe is a public firewalk to raise money for charity. Rather than a quiet tepee in the mountains, this workshop was conducted in an ordinary classroom with a simple power-point presentation and an audience of roughly 20 adults sitting at small desks. Similar to his no nonsense approach to the arrow-breaking exercise (previously discussed), Scott Bell frames the activity in terms of F.E.A.R and leads people to walk on fire just for the fun of it, because they can. The fire was built in the car park outside and the atmosphere was anything but solemn, with a crowd of cheering

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<sup>95</sup> In the dark it was impossible to check each other’s feet for burns or blisters; however, based on observations of (apparently) involuntary reactions while walking it seemed as though a few people may have received slight burns on their second or third crossing; however, at least four of us *did* check our feet and discuss our experiences in detail afterward, and after eight to fifteen slow, intentional steps on a radiant bed of red-hot coals none of us had been harmed in any way – no pain, no burning, no blisters.



spectators and loud rock music in the background – *The Doors*: ‘Come on baby, light my fire...’ In response to a question about these dramatic differences in context, Scott said,

We do different types of firewalk and the one you experienced would be closer to our firedance. Our most popular type of firewalk is the classic. We focus on enjoyment and stay away from the “hippy” perception some people may have. We do not hold hands and sing, as you can see in the DVD.

(Scott Bell, personal communication)

#### GREAT SERPENT WRAP YOUR COILS OF LIGHT AROUND US

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in the video from Mental Combat they *do* hold hands and sing, in a deliberate attempt to create (the impression of) a specialized context or ‘ideal conditions’ for firewalking. Although similar in structure to the workshop in the tepee at Quantum Leaps Lodge, the framing and facilitation of this firewalk seem to involve more explicit interactive rituals, which may be designed to induce a highly suggestible or otherwise altered state of consciousness, similar to mass hypnosis. Unfortunately, editing has left the video footage somewhat fragmented, but participants can be seen using chanting and deep-breathing to collectively ‘psych themselves up’ and the deeper significance of this activity/ceremony is more explicitly metaphysical. At one point the facilitator says, “Great Serpent, wrap your coils of light around us; teach us to shed the past the way you shed your skin” (Mental Combat video). In another segment he seems to address the disembodied ancestors of the participants by saying, “come warm your hands by our fire; whisper to us on the wind. I honour all those who come before us and all those who are yet to come, our children’s children,” while rattling a large gourd ceremonially around the fire (Mental Combat video). As noted earlier, there is nothing inherently wrong with all this, but there is nothing inherently necessary about it either, and I believe it affects the way people process the experience; however, it may merely be the equivalent of linguistic register variation – a way of helping different groups of people make sense of the same information.

#### NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING?

Sternfield (1992) also provides a detailed description of several different styles of firewalking seminar, and at opposite ends of the spectrum are the approaches personified by Tony Robbins and Tolly Burkan. Robbins conducts a slick and stylish ‘empowerment’ workshop on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of a high-rise in downtown

Manhattan, using hours of mass conditioning through Pavlovian stimulus-response patterns and ‘embedding commands’ based on ‘neuro-linguistic programming’ (NLP)<sup>96</sup> to lead over 500 people across the coals in a single night; while Burkan leads more casual and intimate ‘human potential’ workshops that emphasize conscious choice rather than mere conditioning. However, it’s not just the framing, preparation, and overall atmosphere that are different; the two facilitators also behave differently and seem to interact with the fire in fundamentally different ways when they walk:

Instead of the slightly stiff, militaristic strides that Robbins takes across the coals, with eyes up and fist clenched, Burkan saunters across with love and openness, carefully watching where he is going. Effortlessly trodding a shifting mass of glowing coals, he makes it look easy – and fun.

(Sternfield 1992: 49)

Robbins’ upward stare and clenched fist are integral to his NLP-driven approach to firewalking. In addition to simply walking at a normal pace, he tells his participants to “control or align with your inner dialogue” and remember “to stay in physiology,” which is ‘explained’ by demonstrating how to walk ‘correctly’ – “first sucking air down to oxygenate the cells and increase electrical activity; next looking up to place the mental syntax in visual memory; and finally clenching the hand to reawaken pre-programmed feelings of great power, love, and security” (Sternfield 1992: 31). Reflecting on his own experience as a participant in this process, Sternfield says, “The leap of faith involved in subjecting myself to such conditioning seems at once important and a bit insidious... There is some hocus-pocus hypnosis going on here, but if I do not submit to it, I may get burned” (Sternfield 1992: 31).

Although it may be effective and the NLP jargon might make slightly more sense in the context of an entire workshop with Tony Robbins, clearly *none of this is strictly necessary* – you do not need to be ‘reprogrammed’ in order to firewalk safely, and

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<sup>96</sup> NLP is based on various presuppositions and broad generalizations (about language, people, and reality) that are not necessarily supported by academic research in linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, etc. NLP is a heavily marketed self-help product and behavioural-change tool (or ‘technology’ in NLP jargon), which was initially influenced/inspired by the work of Fritz Perls (Gestalt therapy), Virginia Satir (Family therapy), and Milton Erickson (Ericksonian hypnotherapy). The founders and practitioners of NLP do not claim that their presuppositions are *true*; however, they do suggest that behaving *as if they were true* might be a useful/practical way to initiate positive personal changes and improve your ability to influence other people. (For more information see Grinder & Bandler 1981; Bandler & Grinder 1982/1990; O’Connor & McDermott 1996).



thousands of successful firewalks continue to take place around the world without this kind of elaborate conditioning. However, whether rooted in religion, science, or pseudo-psychology, this kind of spontaneous ritual and ceremony are primarily accomplished through language and interaction and may facilitate new ways of being and behaving through conceptual blending, integrated action, and the creation of a specialized context (cf. Sweester 2000).

### **Participants' voices – purpose, proof, & empowerment**

Based on the various firewalking seminars I have studied, there is some evidence that participants draw on the language used by facilitators in order to make sense of these experiences, and that the changes in conceptualization that occur can affect their commonsense assumptions about reality and the interpretation of other people's behaviour. Although the primary motives for engaging in this activity may be different in other cultural contexts, in the UK and North America most participants and facilitators seem to understand the underlying purpose of firewalking in terms of fear, impossibility, and empowerment.

I hated the word impossible. So, uh, impossible is to me a 10-letter dirty word, but uh, I felt that uh, y'know to walk on fire would be a good challenge to get to a second level, y'know of uh, doing impossible things.

(Adult male participant, USA – Napolitano 1993)

I think that uh, we come with preconceived notions about what we can and we can't do depending on what we're told as children, and uh, I think that if we were told from the beginning that you were limitless and you can do whatever you want, and uh walking on fire is simply an example of uh one of the things that is possible, then um, it would be something that everybody does all the time.

(Adult female participant, USA – Napolitano 1993)

I'm hoping that I can walk on fire, without burning my feet, and that will help me to overcome a lot of fear that I have in my life.

(Adult female participant, USA – Napolitano 1993)

The linguistic metaphors used by facilitators to prompt conceptual blending and integrated action are often adopted by participants and incorporated into their own explanation of what they are doing and why. For example, the idea of putting your fears *in* the fire or walking *through* your fear (discussed in the previous chapter) becomes part of participants' understanding of that event:

We've come here tonight to do a firewalk, and the reason why we're doing a firewalk is just to prove I suppose that we can, for one thing, ...and y'know, the purpose being if you've got any limiting beliefs and any issues, any, any problems in your life at all you leave them at the beginning of the fire and you walk through.

(Adult male participant, UK – Mental Combat video)

Afterward, due to imaginative framing by the facilitators and participation in various activities, participants are led to attach a deeper sense of meaning and personal significance to successfully crossing the coals unharmed. This experience becomes empowering and transformational (for some people) because it is interpreted as *proof* of some new insight into reality, which then justifies different behaviour in everyday life.

They're going throat to throat, snapping arrows... [SNAP!] Fabulous. Two arrows, throat to throat – unbelievable. ...This is just the proof that the mind is completely in control of the outcome no matter what. ...Anything is possible. It's what you believe, y'know, and our belief has just such an immense impact on things in our lives.

(Adult female participant, UK – Mental Combat video)

By walking on fire, if you can do that, that's what I was thinking before I went to walk, I said "there's no way I'm walking on this," but I said, "wait a minute; if I could walk across this strip of hot burning coals, I could do anything – anything!" And something just forced me to go over and walk on it, and I was like, after I was done I was like "oh my god, I can do anything."

(Adult female participant, USA – Napolitano 1993)

As these quotes illustrate, people do not walk on fire just to get to the other side – they use this activity as an opportunity to face their fears, challenge their commonsense perception of (im)possibility, and take a dramatic step towards becoming the kind of person they know they want to be. The experience is powerful because it is interpreted as proof of something deeper and more meaningful. According to one firewalk facilitator, "it's never the events of our lives, but the *meanings* we attach to those events, how we interpret them, that shapes who we are today and who we will become tomorrow" (Napolitano video). This is why framing and other aspects of language use are so important and powerful in interaction. In leading people into these new experiences and exposing them to new perspectives and possibilities those in charge can influence the sense making process.

When a personal experience is interpreted as 'proof' of some deeper 'truth' about reality it becomes a significant cognitive/conceptual reference point, which affects



the way subsequent events are understood. Some firewalk facilitators refer to this as a ‘paradigm shift’ – a dramatic change in perspective that affects behaviour and interpretation across contexts because it involves questioning or changing some fundamental belief or assumption about reality.<sup>97</sup> The following extract, based on my field notes from the firewalk at Quantum Leaps Lodge, may offer some evidence of how quickly these deeply held beliefs can change as a result of personal experience being framed in a particular way.

### **A potential ‘paradigm shift’**

This conversation took place approximately one hour after these three participants had successfully completed their first firewalk, all without experiencing any pain, burning, or damage to their feet. Two of them were discussing the possibility that another participant may have been burned because he seemed to jump off to the side rather than walking straight through the centre of the coal-bed, and the following exchange illustrates how their own experience has affected their implicit commonsense assumptions about this activity.

Kev: What about that tall Swiss-German guy? Did you see him?

Jeff: Yeah, I wonder what his problem was?

Tom: !! LAUGHTER !!

Jeff: What?

Tom: Oh yeah, that’s weird. ‘I wonder what his problem was?’...

He was walking *barefoot* across red-hot coals!

Hmm... I wonder what the problem could be?!

All: !! LAUGHTER !!

(Field notes)

The conceptual shift was so smooth and natural that both participants seemed completely sincere in their concern and confusion, which became a shared source of humour in contrast to their previous perspective. Earlier in the evening firewalking was an activity that these participants considered extraordinary, if not impossible; however, based on their own experience (and the way that event was framed and interpreted) it suddenly made perfect sense that people could safely walk across a glowing bed of burning embers. Despite all their background knowledge and previous experience with fire, in this context the shared assumptions had shifted so

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<sup>97</sup> This may not be a ‘paradigm’ in the original sense, as developed by Thomas Kuhn ([1962] 1996).

dramatically that *not* being able to do it became a source of confusion and was interpreted as a sign of some kind of problem.

Language does not determine whether an activity is actually possible or not, but it can convince people to behave *as if it were possible*, which can lead to skill development and surprising discoveries. Through negotiated meaning in interaction facilitators not only prompt participation in imaginary realities, but can also alter people's perception and understanding of events in the 'real' world – including the interpretation of context, automatic/implicit categorization, and the implications of a particular experience. Firewalking doesn't actually 'prove' that *anything* is possible, but that interpretation can lead people to question other assumptions about reality and in the process of testing those beliefs they may discover that they can actually do far more than they previously imagined. Even under extreme or challenging circumstances, ordinary conversation is not 'mind-control' – language can prompt certain mental space connections or frame an event from a particular perspective, which may affect other people's interpretation of the situation, activity, and the kind of people involved, etc. However, the process of converging on a shared understanding is fundamentally collaborative and open to resistance and negotiation. Although one model of reality may be more useful or effective than another, it cannot simply be imposed because it is only 'real' to the extent that people *believe* in it and *behave* as if it were true. Suggesting slight modifications to the dominant worldview people have been raised with is easier than trying to introduce a completely new interpretive framework and understanding of reality; however, even a relatively simple activity like the arrow-breaking exercise or firewalking can be deeply unsettling, because "to bring something this basic, this self-evident, into question raises questions about all of reality" (Stemfield 1992: 17).

### Summary

This chapter has explored fear from the perspective of social performance and implicit collaboration. After introducing the idea that fear is learned behaviour and briefly discussing the role of language in human learning, I considered different forms of fear and the physiological fear response under extreme conditions. In the contexts and activities I have studied the participants have deliberately been led to challenge themselves and choose to step outside their normal comfort zones in a safe



and supportive environment. Although fear is a natural and somewhat predictable response under these conditions, it is carefully monitored by facilitators, who proactively frame it in a positive way and attempt to promote a constructive level of anxiety (Luckner & Nadler 1997: 25) without causing participants to panic.

The examples in the first section emphasized impression management and the performance of fear as a collaborative social accomplishment, highlighting how description and dialogue can make internal/invisible aspects of personal experience 'real' for an audience, and demonstrating some of the social functions that the performance of fear serves in social interaction. The second section focussed specifically on the redefinition of fear in firewalking workshops, and I argued that it is not only exposure to extraordinary examples or participation in the activity itself that transforms peoples' concepts of (im)possibility, but the way those events are framed and interpreted that leads to personal empowerment. Instead of merely facing one particular fear under carefully controlled circumstances, participants are led to interpret that experience in terms of deeper 'truths' about fear in general and reality itself.

In the next (and final) chapter I consider this entire research project as a whole and describe some of the most interesting/inspiring individuals and intimidating/inexplicable activities that I have stumbled across as a result of 'seriously' questioning my own perception of (im)possibility and beliefs about reality. I briefly summarize the previous chapters and highlight a few potential applications of this research in areas such as motivational speaking, international relations, and environmental advocacy. I explore deeper underlying themes such as (un)certainty, (mis)perception, faith in science, and the implications of belief in a string of words. Finally, I demonstrate that 'crazy' ideas are sometimes more 'realistic' than we expect and conclude with an example that illustrates the challenge of being open to new possibilities but simultaneously sceptical as we evaluate the social knowledge claims of other people and try to make sense of our own personal experience.

CHAPTER SIX:  
**Implications & Applications**

In the long run men hit only what they aim at.  
Therefore, though they should fail immediately,  
they had better aim at something high.  
~ Henry David Thoreau<sup>98</sup>

**Introduction**

This research began as a broad, open-ended investigation into the perception of (im)possibility, self-imposed limitations, and how our beliefs about reality can be challenged or changed through language and interaction. I have focussed specifically on the language-related aspects of framing, imagination, and social performance in order to demonstrate the power/ability of an individual (or group) to affect other people's behaviour in various contexts by leading them to interpret/experience reality from a different perspective. Through careful observation and analysis of the way facilitators use language in experiential education, hypnotherapy, and firewalking workshops I have shown how participants are led to question some of their underlying assumptions about reality and attempt the 'impossible.'

I have argued throughout for a more interactive approach to framing, providing additional evidence that it is not just part of an individual's personal interpretive process but something we (strategically) do for other people as we attempt to negotiate a shared understanding of meaning, context, and interaction. Building on conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner 2002), I have emphasized the power of imagination and integrated action to redefine reality, allowing participants to actively engage in 'unrealistic' activities that create the conditions or incentives for new ways of being and behaving in the world. In applying Goffman's (1990) insights into social performance and impression management to interaction in particularly scary or challenging situations I have offered a new perspective on the expression and interpretation of fear in certain contexts, and demonstrated how various facilitators exploit perceived risk and challenge participants' commonsense assumptions in order to effectively redefine the experience of fear and promote a positive or more empowering interpretation of particular activities.

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<sup>98</sup> *Walden* (1854).



By drawing on a range of research literature from various fields I have attempted to situate my own observations of language use within a larger body of interdisciplinary work dealing with issues such as perception/categorization, epistemology, and the social construction of reality; nevertheless, I still feel as if I am merely scratching the surface. Seriously questioning my personal beliefs about (im)possibility has constantly kept me on the edge of my ever-expanding comfort-zone as I struggle to make sense of my personal experience and scrape together some provisional understanding of everything I have been exposed to as a result of this research. In addition to experiential education, hypnotherapy, and firewalking, I have stumbled across several other surprising activities, inspiring people, and alternate ‘realities’ that could not fully be explored within this thesis but inevitably influenced my increasing awareness of ‘hidden’ possibilities and human potential. The questions I have chosen to explore are exciting and engaging, but also deeply challenging because when you begin to pick at the fabric of reality there is always a risk of unravelling your own identity and worldview in the process. In this chapter I discuss a few potential implications and applications of my research, while simultaneously drawing attention to the many intriguing avenues that remain for future research.

### **The power of language**

Linguistics, and interactional pragmatics in particular, is only one approach among many that can potentially offer insight into practical interpersonal empowerment; however, as I initially suggested in the introduction, language is one of the most convenient, versatile, and widely-used ways of expressing ourselves and understanding/influencing other people, which makes it particularly powerful in social interaction. Scholars and practitioners in many (if not all) of the ‘helping’ professions rely on language to interact with their clients, understand their problems, and offer some form of assistance – from educators, therapists, and social workers, to self-help authors, motivational speakers, and spiritual teachers. Language is not the *only* way to help people, and may not even be the most effective way to create change under some circumstances; however, once you have people’s attention it becomes possible to lead their mind through language, and by strategically tapping into the sense-making process you can influence the perceptions, beliefs, and behaviour that combine to create their personal sense of reality. Although the social,

cultural, or historical context seems to impose certain constraints on individual human agency and the apparently natural/biological limitations of our own physical embodiment cannot simply be ignored, language affects the way we interpret and respond to these challenges in our daily lives.

The potential for personal growth and social change are rooted in imagination and the perception of possibility. Mere exposure to the unknown or unexpected is not enough; people need to weave new ideas and inspiring examples into their current worldviews in a way that helps them see the similarities in their own life or identity and recognize that these are ‘realistic’ options *for them*. Success cannot be guaranteed, and change is rarely instant or automatic because new skills, ideas, and patterns of thought or behaviour often take time to develop, but we only *practise* things we consider possible. Language also allows us to clarify and articulate our hopes, dreams, and intentions, and in the long run we stand a much better chance of achieving goals we clearly define and actively work towards, both individually and collectively. Since we are born into complex overlapping systems of natural and social interdependence, the needs of other people/species and the planet itself must also be taken into account, which is why the ability to understand, evaluate, and potentially integrate alternative perspectives is so important. Our beliefs about reality (and our personal identity or role within it) fundamentally affect our subjective sense of well-being, perceived quality of life, and hope for the future, which all have an impact on the way we interact with other people and the planet.

Although this thesis is based upon the observation and analysis of interaction and specific activities in three somewhat specialized contexts, I believe many of the issues and insights discussed in the previous chapters can be adapted and applied in other areas. While sharing this research through public presentations and private conversations I have met many people who immediately respond to the idea of abseiling, firewalking, or the arrow-breaking exercise with “oh, I could never do that!” However, as I became more aware of the language of limitations in everyday life, I began to notice people responding to other ‘crazy’ ideas like becoming a pilot, being awarded a major international scholarship, or doing a PhD in exactly the same way. Some people insist that there is a fundamental difference between snapping an arrow with your throat and something like going to university or getting a particular



job, but once you are aware that other human beings have done these things it basically comes down to perceived risk or category membership, personal beliefs about ‘reality,’ and the way you choose to respond to fear or uncertainty. We all draw the line between possible and impossible somewhere, and most of us can probably provide a plausible explanation if necessary – but I’m particularly interested in the variation within our limited and partial worldviews, and the way different belief systems can lead us to make sense of our experiences in dramatically different ways. Although some psychologists and philosophers may prefer to frame these issues in terms of theories, thoughts, or ideas (metaphorically) inside an individual’s mind, I am interested in the (interpersonal/social) exchange of thoughts and ideas, which are primarily expressed, challenged, and clarified through language use.<sup>99</sup> As a result, I see potential applications of this research in various areas, which I will now discuss in relation to a few inspiring individuals who illustrate my point that most of us may be holding ourselves back because we are unaware of our true potential.

### **Reframing & rehabilitation: what does it mean to be disabled?**

Many people experience some form of physical limitation in their lives – blindness, paralysis, missing limbs, lack of motor control, etc. – perhaps from birth due to genetic factors or later in life as a result of an accident, injury, or the ageing process. The reality of these physical constraints often cannot be changed (through language or otherwise), so in that sense certain things may be impossible for these people; however, the perception of problems vs. possibilities and the individual’s personal response to various challenges in everyday life *can* be altered through reframing, encouragement, and other forms of language use.<sup>100</sup> What does it *mean* to go blind, lose a limb, or suddenly become paralysed from the waist down? Theoretically, individual responses could range from “nothing” to “everything,” and what one person gratefully sees as a new beginning and positive transition or turning point another could interpret as the premature and tragic end of their previous life and

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<sup>99</sup> I recognize that thought itself may not require language and certain concepts or ideas can also be expressed, socially shared, and effectively challenged through art, music, and other media. Language is merely one way to access and engage with the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of other people. Although it can offer some insight into (and potentially influence) the subjective world of another person, it cannot reflect ‘reality’ fully or directly; at best it provides a glimpse into their personal ‘projected reality’ (Jackendoff 1985; Evans & Green 2006: 7).

<sup>100</sup> This observation applies to *everyone*, not just people faced with these particular physical limitations.

identity. With awareness there is the opportunity to choose a more positive and empowering interpretation of these potentially traumatic events/experiences; however, it may be necessary to remind people of their power to choose and help them appreciate all the alternatives that exist (whether 'realistic' or otherwise).

Aspects of hypnosis have been compared to a state of shock (Linden 2001: 42), and clinical studies have shown that people may be particularly susceptible to the power of suggestion following severe trauma or a major medical/dental procedure (Burrows, Stanley, & Bloom 2001). Similar to the various facilitators I have studied, medical professionals and occupational therapists are in a position of social authority and perceived expertise, which gives them the power and opportunity to strongly influence the perception, experience, and expectations of their patients/clients. However, friends, family, and coworkers can also use language-based strategies such as framing and conceptual blending to help with the healing and recovery process. We do not create meaning in isolation, but in relation to the ideas, actions, and expectations of those around us. Although dramatic lifestyle changes may be inevitable, they can potentially be embraced rather than resisted and the assumptions surrounding those changes can be actively questioned and tested. Variation in physical ability is normal among human beings and all our bodies gradually change over time, but natural limitations due to physical differences don't necessarily have to be interpreted as 'problems.'

My thoughts on this topic have been inspired by the powerful positive example of a friend I went to school with, Josh Dueck.<sup>101</sup> Dueck is passionate about the sport of freestyle skiing and spent three years intensively training and competing on the international circuit in pursuit of his dream of eventually representing his community and country in the Olympics. Despite his dedication to the sport, he was forced to retire from competition due to financial constraints, which led him into a successful career as a fully certified freestyle skiing coach in both moguls and aerials. However, on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2004 he miscalculated his speed on a demonstration jump, overshot the landing hill, and landed flat on his chest – folding in half like a scorpion and severing his spinal cord. He was 23 years-old.

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<sup>101</sup> This account is primarily based on personal communication and a recent press release provided by Josh Dueck.



As soon as I woke up from the surgery, I realized I was reborn a new person, and had to learn to live a new life. Doctors told me my life would forever be changed – talk about an understatement! The loss of my legs, bowels, and bladder was a tough pill to swallow.

(Dueck 2007)

According to Dueck, the way his doctor initially framed the results of the accident had a powerful and positive influence on his perception, attitude, and subsequent approach to life:

When the doctor first explained the results of my accident, he looked at me and said I was going to be awesome in a wheelchair and that before long I was going to be back on the mountain with all my friends... He told me what I still had to look forward to in life, not what I had just lost, and that outlook on life carried me through many challenging moments in the hospital as I learned how to manage my disability.

(Josh Dueck, personal communication)

The following winter he was back on the slopes in a sit-ski<sup>102</sup> and adapting his skills to reconnect with the joy of skiing and learn to move down the mountain in a new and exciting way. He claims that “the only difference between the impossible and possible is one’s attitude” (Dueck 2007), and through his passion and perseverance he quickly established himself as a serious international competitor in disabled-skiing events, earned a spot on the Canadian national team, and set his sights on a gold medal at the 2010 Paralympics.<sup>103</sup> He is also keenly aware of the power of his personal story and the opportunity to inspire others by sharing his perspective and positive interpretation of this life-changing event as a public speaker.

Prior to my injury, when I saw someone in a wheelchair I’d think to myself, ‘life’s done for that guy; it’s all over.’ That’s such a misconception, and I’m on a mission to blow down that stereotype!

(Dueck 2007)

Other inspiring individuals who have demonstrated a similar approach to dealing with ‘disability’ include Kyle Maynard and Jim MacLaren. As a result of a condition called congenital amputation, Maynard was born without arms or legs below his elbows and knees. Since he has no hands or fingers he cannot eat, type, or take notes

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<sup>102</sup> A sit-ski is a ‘bucket’ or enclosed seat mounted onto a shock and footplate similar in shape to a ski boot, which can then be attached to a single ordinary ski/binding.

<sup>103</sup> The term *Paralympics* (or *Paralympic Games*) is a contraction of ‘parallel Olympics’ and refers to an equivalent international competition for athletes with physical disabilities.

the same way I do; however, that does not mean that any of these things are ‘impossible’ for him – it simply requires imagination and adaptation. In fact, by choosing to adapt to life without special treatment or the use of prosthetics he found his own way to use a spoon, hold a pencil, and type up to 50 words per minute using little more than his shoulder muscles (Washington Speakers’ Bureau 2008). He has excelled as a competitive college-level wrestler against able-bodied athletes, been employed as a fashion model and motivational speaker, and written an autobiography entitled *No Excuses* (Maynard 2005) that explains his positive attitude and approach to life.<sup>104</sup>

Jim MacLaren<sup>105</sup> was another gifted young athlete with high hopes for the future when he was hit by a bus at the age of 22. Although initially pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital, after a week in a coma and a lengthy recovery from severe internal injuries he ultimately left the hospital in relatively good health, but without his left leg below the knee. Rather than lingering on the loss of his leg, MacLaren chose to adapt to this dramatic change and challenge his perceived limitations, gradually transforming his 300 lb. (American) football-player frame into the lean body of a long-distance runner and eventually becoming the fastest one-legged endurance athlete on the planet – setting new world records in both the marathon and the Ironman triathlon. Looking back he says, “I never wanted to be taken for granted, as that guy with the fake leg. So I just kept pushing myself” (MacLaren 2006), and as a result he routinely finished ahead of 80 percent of the able-bodied athletes. However eight years later, while competing in a triathlon on a closed course, his life took another unexpected twist – he was hit by a van, broke his neck, and became a quadriplegic. When the doctors told him he would never be able to move or feel anything below his chest again he thought, “I don’t know if I can do this again” (MacLaren 2006), but deep within himself he found the will and determination to transcend those expectations. Incredibly, despite initially being diagnosed as a complete quadriplegic, through intensive rehabilitation driven by a persistent belief in his own ability MacLaren has actually regained sense perception and motor control in his limbs and lower body. Although considered ‘miraculous’ by many, none of this has been easy, and he pays a high price for the abilities he has

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<sup>104</sup> Images and video clips of Kyle Maynard can be found on YouTube and his MySpace website.

<sup>105</sup> This account is based on Jim MacLaren’s personal/promotional website: [www.jimmaclaren.com](http://www.jimmaclaren.com).



gradually regained, which illustrates the relative nature of perception and our subjective concepts of 'good' and 'bad': "I've gotten all my sensation back, which is a gift, but it means I'm in chronic pain 24 hours a day. Although that may sound horrible to some people, I wouldn't trade it" (Cotton 2006). MacLaren has struggled with fear of the future and deep feelings of loss as a result of his accidents; however, at one point his limitations weighed so heavily on his soul that he suddenly awoke to a powerful personal insight:

I found my strength by saying and believing "I am not my body. I am a man." I'm alive – as alive as anyone who is jamming a basketball or scoring a touchdown or, y'know, hugging their child. Being alive is being alive. ...It's a good thing.

(MacLaren 2006)

Josh Dueck, Kyle Maynard, and Jim MacLaren each illustrate a point that was emphasized at the end of the previous chapter – it's not the events in our lives that make us who we are, but our personal interpretation and response to those events that matters (Napolitano 1993). Although still occasionally frustrated by their current physical condition, all three of these men have discovered a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in their lives as a result of their 'disabilities' and are committed to sharing the insights they have gained and inspiring others to engage in self-reflection, live life more fully, and courageously pursue their dreams. Perhaps in some small way my research on (im)possibility and the pragmatics of empowerment can help people like Dueck, Maynard, and MacLaren improve their ability to connect with different audiences, challenge the unhelpful assumptions that are holding people back, and lead people to see the world from a more meaningful and empowering perspective. Although their attitude and personal example are inherently inspiring, increased language awareness might allow them to use framing, metaphor, and conceptual blending more strategically in order to share their stories and perspective in a more powerful and effective way.

### **International relations & conflict resolution**

In addition to helping individuals interpret their personal experiences in more empowering ways and imagine new options and alternatives for the future, I also see how my research could contribute to international relations and conflict resolution. For example, in a personal conversation that took place in Jerusalem in June 2008, Professor Jeff Halper, director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition

(ICAHD),<sup>106</sup> explicitly emphasized the need to ‘reframe’ the ongoing conflict in the West Bank and Gaza in terms of military occupation, human rights, and international law. As a result of overlapping cultural, political, and religious claims to the land and different interpretations of the history of the region, people living in the same city or in neighbouring communities often see the same situation from fundamentally different perspectives, and in the absence of a shared belief system many of the theological issues and moral arguments cease to make sense because there is no agreement on the underlying assumptions and interpretation of context. Rather than promoting a distinctly ‘pro-Israeli’ or ‘pro-Palestinian’ interpretation, I believe Halper’s goal is to articulate a ‘pro-Peace’ or ‘pro-Justice’ position that will facilitate meaningful and constructive dialogue among people with different points of view.<sup>107</sup>

Although I cannot claim to understand the perspectives, emotions, or experiences of the people who live in the State of Israel or the Occupied Territories and the challenges they deal with on a daily basis, I believe the interaction I have analysed in previous chapters can contribute to the peace-building process by providing insight into fear, framing, and the negotiation of a shared sense of reality. Due to real and perceived risks resulting from the current conflict many Israelis and Palestinians are living in a state of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, and aspects of my research that deal with these issues can potentially be adapted to this extremely complex and challenging context. Perhaps by reframing the situation, creating new connections in mental space, and prompting integrated action through conceptual blending, those working towards peace can help people suffering on both sides to understand each other better and see how much they have in common despite the linguistic, cultural, and religious differences. As more Israelis and Palestinians begin to converge on a shared interpretation of context and/or vision of a more peaceful future, it will become easier to communicate, cooperate, and create that reality (cf. Drake & Donohue 1996). Although the changes may not be easy or instantaneous, social and

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<sup>106</sup> ICAHD is a non-violent, direct-action group comprised of members of many Israeli peace and human rights organizations. It was originally established to oppose and resist Israeli demolition of Palestinian houses in the Occupied Territories, but is also concerned with land expropriation, settlement expansion, by-pass road construction, and the wholesale uprooting of fruit and olive trees, etc. ([www.icahd.org](http://www.icahd.org)).

<sup>107</sup> I realize at first glance Halper’s reframing may appear distinctly pro-Palestinian due to the current political situation and (military) power imbalance; however, in the (unlikely) event of a power reversal or independent Arab/Palestinian state being formed in the West Bank an emphasis on human rights would also serve the interests of Jewish people living in predominantly Arab areas.



political leaders can potentially act as facilitators by helping people recognize peace as a realistic possibility and highlighting the issues that need to be addressed in order to make it stable and sustainable.<sup>108</sup> However, according to Agne (2007) reframing is a conversational practice that may also sustain conflicts rather than resolve them, potentially leading to a standoff situation, because without cooperation and compromise reframing will not necessarily help.

### **Environmental & social advocacy**

Aspects of my observations and analysis can also potentially be applied to environmental and social advocacy. In order to appreciate the implications of climate change, a peak oil crisis, or factory farming people need to create relevant and meaningful connections between the science or statistics and their own choices, needs, and worldview. In order to take effective action in response to disturbing realities such as political oppression, state-sanctioned torture, and the exploitation of women, children, or any other vulnerable group, people need to recognize the root causes of suffering and realize that by getting involved they *can* make a difference. Everything in this thesis is fundamentally about changing people's perspective through language and interaction, helping them to see new options or alternative ways of being, and inspiring them to take action despite their fear, doubt, or insecurity. Many of the global problems now faced by humanity are collaboratively created but difficult to directly perceive on a local level. As a result, understanding the overlapping systems of interdependence we rely upon, from international trade and our debt-based economy to the earth's water cycle and biosphere, is fundamentally an *imaginative* activity.

We are already participating in activities based on imaginary scenarios everyday, from buying food with a debit card to parking in designated spaces, but framing, metaphor, and conceptual blending can change the way we choose to interpret and interact with the collaborative systems that surround us. Gray (2003) and others have explored the influence of framing on environmental disputes (see Lewicki, Gray, & Elliott 2003), and Al Gore has spoken publicly about the need to reframe the

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<sup>108</sup> Unfortunately, language can also be used to incite fear, increase misperception, and promote negative cultural stereotypes based on superficial differences and broad generalizations. Although I prefer to focus on what I consider 'positive' applications of framing, blending, and imaginary realities, I am not claiming these are their only uses.

climate crisis and the lifestyle changes required for our long-term survival as an opportunity rather than a burden (Gore 2008). Films such as *A Crude Awakening*<sup>109</sup> attempt to help people recognize the depth of our society's dependence on oil in order to prepare them for the challenges we will face when this finite resource inevitably runs out, and Leonardo DiCaprio's film *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour*<sup>110</sup> highlights the urgency of these social and environmental issues by weaving recent scientific findings into a coherent narrative with a clear message that people can (hopefully) relate to – it's not about 'saving the planet' but about ensuring the essential conditions for our own survival as a species. Similar to the work of Stibbe (2008; 2005), Verhagen (2008), and others involved in the Language and Ecology Research Forum ([www.ecoling.net](http://www.ecoling.net)), my point is that increased language awareness can make an important contribution within higher education and in society at large. Interactional pragmatics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and other aspects of linguistics can not only highlight the influence of metaphor, presupposition, implicature, etc. in order to help people deconstruct and evaluate competing narratives, discourses, and framings of the same situation or event, but also give people the tools to express their own vision of reality more effectively. Ultimately all our ideas of a 'better' world are culturally relative, so we need to communicate and cooperate if we ever hope to succeed in creating one that is peaceful and sustainable, but in order to take effective action we also need to overcome social apathy and believe that we can make a difference, which is where a better understanding of (im)possibility and the pragmatics of empowerment can help.

### **Science vs. storytelling**

According to ethnobotanist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Wade Davis (2003), the central revelation of anthropology is that "the world in which we live does not exist in some absolute sense, but is just one model of reality." He argues that every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities, and highlights the catastrophic erosion of the ethnosphere, the spiritual and cultural equivalent of the biosphere. What Wade's metaphors emphasize is that the indigenous knowledge and culture-specific concepts or practices encoded in the languages of the world are not just exotic labels for the same

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<sup>109</sup> See [www.oilcrashmovie.com](http://www.oilcrashmovie.com) for more information.

<sup>110</sup> See [www.11thhourfilm.com](http://www.11thhourfilm.com) or [www.leonardodicaprio.org](http://www.leonardodicaprio.org) for more information.



old ideas but ancient living expressions of human imagination/consciousness that are irreplaceable and deserve to be protected. He goes on to suggest that every culture creates a different reality or worldview, and that storytelling can change the world by exposing people to alternative interpretations of what it means to be here/human and fundamentally different ways of being in the world. I agree.

The more I have investigated people's ideas about what they can or cannot do and questioned their underlying beliefs about why, the more I have come to recognize the power of storytelling. What people take to be 'proof' in social interaction is often merely a coherent argument, plausible interpretation, or claim from a credible source (cf. Duran 1994); nevertheless, people often base their behaviour on belief in these stories, which typically entail implicit categorization and subjective value-judgments. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach; our rule-governed behaviour and various theories about the world we inhabit often serve us well. However, clinging too tightly to one provisional perspective or articulation of 'the truth' as if it were an accurate reflection of absolute reality is ultimately unhelpful and potentially quite dangerous. Both science and spirituality offer explanations for the mysteries of life we are immersed in and suggest alternative interpretations of who we are, how we got here, and why things seem to work the way they do; however, it is important not to confuse the stories with the observations or experiences they are based upon.

Science, as understood by those who actually practise it, is primarily a method rather than a belief system – and the same could be said of meditation and many other spiritual practices. Although each approach may be based on any number of underlying assumptions, the point is to investigate reality in a systematic way through direct experience and observation.<sup>111</sup> In the book *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Shermer (1999) emphasizes that scepticism is a vital part of science and points out that a claim is considered 'factual' when it is confirmed to such an extent that it would be reasonable to offer temporary agreement; however, all facts and conclusions in science are provisional and subject to challenge (Shermer 1999: 16). A scientific *theory* is defined as a well-supported and well-tested hypothesis (i.e.

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<sup>111</sup> I am not claiming that the knowledge/insight gained from meditation and other spiritual practices is *equivalent* to the results of rigorous scientific research. Although they are both based on human experience, observation, and interpretation, due to fundamental differences in methodology there is a qualitative difference in the kind of knowledge produced/acquired.

testable statement accounting for a set of observations), and contrasts with a *construct*, which is a nontestable statement of belief (Shermer 1999: 19-20). Nevertheless, Shermer also acknowledges that “in many ways science has merely justified the successive substitutions of more modern myths for obsolete ones as the basis for our understanding of the world” (Olson 1991: 3; quoted in Shermer 1999: 30), and admits that “most of us harbour a type of faith in science, a confidence that somehow science will solve our major problems – AIDS, overpopulation, cancer, pollution, heart disease, and so on” (Shermer 1999: 7).

Unfortunately there are still plenty of ways our thinking can go wrong or be misled: anecdotes and scientific language do not make a science; bold statements do not make claims true; and rumours do not equal reality (Shermer 1999). Problems can arise due to powerful/emotional rhetoric, faulty logic or reasoning, human psychological and perceptual constraints, and the equipment/assumptions of the scientific method itself. Shermer (1999: 20) claims that the scientific method is an attempt to avoid mysticism and dogmatism in the pursuit of objectivity (i.e. knowledge based on evidence and external validation rather than personal insight or social authority); however, we tend to rely heavily on authorities and experts for our ‘scientific’ knowledge of the world, which leaves most of us with nothing more than social knowledge claims or anecdotes about ‘scientific’ experiments and results we have never personally witnessed, performed, or experienced. Although some people may be able to refer to the research literature and duplicate the experiments themselves, most of us do not have the necessary skills, resources, or specialized equipment to verify the latest scientific findings for ourselves. It is highly impractical to systematically question *every* belief about reality, so in the absence of any obvious contradiction most people rely on the stories they have been told about the way things are, and trust that they will be duly informed of any dramatic or important changes in the dominant/orthodox worldview they were raised with or educated into.<sup>112</sup> I am not suggesting that most people’s beliefs about reality are static or entirely based on external sources, only that we tend to assume we

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<sup>112</sup> In the words of Professor Verena Huber-Dyson, “most of what I believe I cannot prove, simply for lack of time and energy – truths I’d claim to know because they have been proved by others. That is how inextricably our beliefs are tied up with labours accomplished by fellow beings” (Brockman 2005: 80).



(collectively) ‘know’ what’s going on and how the world works because many of the details are largely irrelevant in our daily lives.<sup>113</sup> However, when forced to make sense of new and unexpected or inexplicable experiences that challenge our implicit assumptions about reality we may suddenly recognize the gaps in our otherwise comprehensive worldview, and if that anomaly cannot be ignored then we will seek out a story or explanation that allows us to comfortably integrate that experience into our personal belief system.

According to Shermer (1999: 6), sceptics and believers alike are motivated by the same sense of mystery, awe, and hope to engage in a quest to find meaning and order in the universe, and because science is the touchstone of truth in our culture pseudo-scientists know that their ideas must at least *appear* scientific in order to gain influence and respectability. However, “dressing up a belief system in the trappings of science by using scientific language and jargon, as in ‘creation-science,’ means nothing without evidence, experimental testing, and corroboration” (Shermer 1999: 49). Linguistics and epistemology can provide people with the language awareness and critical thinking skills to interpret and evaluate competing knowledge claims and the belief systems they reflect, which is not merely an academic exercise but a necessity of interpersonal interaction that will affect the way they explore, experience, and make sense of the world. Unfortunately, critical thinking does not come naturally; it takes training, experience, and effort to develop the habit (Shermer 1999: 59). In the words of Alfred Mander:

Thinking is skilled work. It is not true that we are naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically – without learning how, or without practicing. People with untrained minds should no more expect to think clearly and logically than people who have never learned and never practiced can expect to find themselves good carpenters, golfers, bridge players, or pianists.

(Mander 1947: viii; quoted in Shermer 1999: 59)

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<sup>113</sup> For example, the cells and organs of my body seem to function whether or not I accurately understand their internal structure; I perceive and interact with physical reality in roughly the same way regardless of whether electrons are conceptualized as particles or waves (or both); and it effectively makes no meaningful difference in my life whether *I believe* the earth is spinning or the sun is moving across the sky. Obviously I rely on thousands of things every day that exploit a relatively accurate understanding of the universe, but my point is that the ‘facts’ are provisional and constantly changing yet at any given moment we behave *as if* our worldviews were whole and stable.

### **Certainty & belief in a string of words**

According to Brockman (2005: xi), our species is currently dealing with a surfeit of certainty that is sustained by an abundance of correct answers and a naïve sense of conviction. However, in the introduction to a book called *What We Believe but Cannot Prove* (Brockman 2005: xii), he suggests that today's leading scientists and intellectuals are increasingly looking beyond their individual areas of expertise, thinking deeply about the limits of human knowledge, and treating science and technology as a means of tuning in to deeper questions about who we are and how we know what we know. This fascinating collection of short submissions from leading scientists and their 'intellectual allies' across a wide range of disciplines highlights the deeper mysteries of life that still exist behind the veil of labels, concepts, and theories we project on the world in order to create the illusion of understanding. It seems we cannot avoid making assumptions about reality, whether the method we choose to explore it is based on science or spirituality; we can only continue to question, challenge, and consciously change the assumptions as our own subjective understanding of the world evolves through exposure to new ideas and experiences. However, as Sam Harris points out (Brockman 2005: 52), "the difference between believing and disbelieving a statement – your spouse is cheating on you; you've just won \$10 million – is one of the most potent regulators of human behaviour and emotion. The instant we accept a given representation of the world as true, it becomes the basis for further thought and action; rejected as false, it remains a string of words."

Once again we return to the power of language – and belief in a string of words – to influence the way we understand and interact with the world. Depending on the sources you choose to trust, there are now scientific theories that seem to reflect ancient spiritual truths and spiritual interpretations of the latest scientific results. Quantum physics and ancient scriptures both seem to suggest that physical reality is not actually as solid as it seems, Mindfulness based stress-reduction and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) have brought Buddhist principles into mainstream psychology (Kabat-Zinn 1990; Hayes & Smith 2005), and the concept of *energy* effectively blurs the distinction between the physical and metaphysical in alternative medicine (Ristimaki 2005). The reason language is so significant is because it prompts us to create imaginative/interpretive connections between different domains



of knowledge and experience, and in the absence of proof we often settle for provisional facts and plausible explanations. As this thesis has demonstrated, through framing, conceptual blending, and integrated action, people can be led to see reality from a new perspective or behave as if certain things were true; they may interpret a particular experience as ‘evidence’ of some deeper truth or insight, and with enough awareness they can learn to choose how they respond to stress, anxiety, or fear. Regardless of the facts, the stories we tell each other and ourselves have the power to inspire or inhibit personal growth and active exploration of our own potential. Whether spoken in a conversation, film, or academic lecture, or written on a web-page, warning sign, or temple wall, language excites the imagination and initiates a search for meaning and understanding. It may be distinctly ‘scientific’ discourse or ‘spiritual’ discourse, and explicitly presented as a matter of fact or faith, but in either case it is still just a string of words.

Our individual and collective understanding of what is possible or impossible can certainly be affected by rigorous and repeated scientific experimentation; however, many of the world’s top scientists will be the first to admit that there are limits to our current (provisional) understanding of the universe, it is certainly not the whole picture, and even they believe a variety of things they cannot prove (see Brockman 2005). According to computer scientist Alan Kay:

When we guess in science, we are guessing about approximations and mappings to languages, not guessing about ‘the truth’ – and we are not in a good state of mind for doing science if we think we are ‘guessing the truth’ or ‘finding the truth.’ This is not at all well understood outside science, and unfortunately some people with science degrees don’t seem to understand it either.

(Alan Kay, in Brockman 2005: 120).

As far as changing other people’s ideas through interpersonal communication and interaction are concerned, regardless of what we’re talking *about* we are still just talking (or writing). Those who inspire people to attempt the ‘impossible’ regularly rely on anecdotes, explanations, and accounts of previous observations or experiences, which are inherently subjective, inevitably influenced by selective attention, and often deliberately shaped to hide or highlight certain features through metaphor, analogy, etc. Expert opinions are often recontextualized and recycled as ‘facts’ in the media, the observations of scientists and journalists are assumed to be

‘objective,’ and we are implicitly taught to trust our textbooks despite the date they were printed. My point is that in everyday interaction language shapes the way we see the world more than science because we base our beliefs and behaviour on the social knowledge claims of other people, and whether we accept, reject, or ignore new information depends upon our evaluation of the source and how it relates to our current worldview (cf. Ristimaki 2006; Verhagen 2008). When confronted with something mysterious or extraordinary we are forced to find a way to make sense of it somehow or deal with the cognitive dissonance created by accepting that we have no explanation for what we have seen, which may be experienced as a childlike sense of awe and wonder or an uncomfortable sense of uncertainty and fear.

Many people are overconfident enough to think that if they cannot explain something, it must be inexplicable and therefore a true mystery of the paranormal. ...Even those who are more reasonable at least think that if the *experts* cannot explain something, it must be inexplicable. Feats such as the bending of spoons, firewalking, or mental telepathy are often thought to be of a paranormal or mystical nature because most people cannot explain them. [However,] when they are explained most people respond, “Yes, of course” or “That’s obvious once you see it.”

(Shermer 1999: 52)

### ‘Scientific’ explanations & social roles

It’s the *explanation* that determines whether people interpret something like spoon-bending or firewalking as normal or paranormal; these unusual activities can be done by people with a wide range of beliefs about why they work, but for each individual some explanations will be more acceptable than others.<sup>114</sup> Each interpretation has different implications for the individual’s overall worldview and belief system, which is why some people will automatically dismiss what they see as a trick or illusion and others will insist that they *need* a ‘scientific’ explanation or it is ‘scientifically impossible.’

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<sup>114</sup> During my research I have also investigated the phenomenon of spoon-bending and confirmed for myself that it is possible (with the hands). This is not an ironic or irrelevant comment – there are various forms of spoon-bending, and some involve physical manipulation of the spoon with two hands while others *appear to be* more mental or psychic, which unfortunately I have not experienced. Although I have also learned several ways to *fake* a spoon-bending performance, the technique I was initially shown is not a deliberate trick or illusion. In addition to my own subjective experience of feeling the spoon become unexpectedly soft and pliable, I have also taught the basic technique to several other people who, with diligent practice, were able to achieve similar results and create surprising shapes with relatively little effort; however, at this point I cannot endorse any particular explanation for why it works.



There is a qualitative difference between knowledge or beliefs acquired through direct observation/experience and those based on the verbal or written account of another person, but the experience of being *shown* or *taught* something is not the same as independently discovering it yourself. Context, impression management, and the perception of social roles or categories affect what we see as relevant and the background knowledge we draw upon in constructing an explanation for the events we observe and experience. It makes a difference whether a physics professor or a spiritual teacher tells you your physical form is mostly empty space; however, in both cases it is still just a social knowledge claim, which cannot be personally verified under normal circumstances. For example, compare the following two quotations, which may or may not reflect your current beliefs about reality, and consider whether one claim is any more credible than the other:

An atom consists of a dense, positively charged nucleus surrounded by a system of electrons [and] the mass of the nucleus is confined to a volume approximating a sphere of radius of approximately  $1 \times 10^{-15}$  m. The closest electron is approximately  $1 \times 10^{-10}$  m. In perspective, if the radius of the nucleus were approximately the thickness of a dime, the nearest electron would be approximately the length of a football field away.

(Priest 2004: 157-158)

Physicists have discovered that the apparent solidity of matter is an illusion created by our senses. This includes the physical body, which we perceive of and think of as form, but 99.99% of which is actually empty space. This is how vast the space is between the atoms compared to their size, and there is as much space again within each atom. The physical body is no more than a misperception of who you are. In many ways it is a microcosmic version of outer space.

(Tolle 2005: 250)

Neither of these claims reflects my personal experience of reality, but they both have implications for my worldview if I accept them as facts. Presumably there are certain experiments that can be done to demonstrate the existence, size, and structure of atoms, but I have no idea what they are or how to perform them. As a result of what I was taught in secondary school, I still tend to imagine an atom as a tiny solar-system with a nucleus at the centre and electrons whirling around it; however, according to Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 165), “no self-respecting physicist has believed since 1914 that an atom is a tiny solar system.” I cannot independently verify any of these claims, but choosing to believe them affects the way I imagine reality, which determines the kind of things I believe are possible.

For example, on the basis of a scientific/spiritual understanding of reality similar to the previous two quotes, I have been told by a Qigong<sup>115</sup> master that everything is essentially made up of energy vibrating at different frequencies, and therefore by changing the frequency of your physical body it becomes possible to walk through walls (Dr. Effie Poy Yew Chow, personal communication). However, if you ever actually see someone do it, your initial interpretation will be heavily influenced by whether you're watching a magician or a monk. Social roles affect our expectations and assumptions, including any apparent incentives for deliberate deception and whether or not we see ourselves as the same *kind* of person and therefore capable of similar accomplishments.

### **Perceived categories, personal experience, & the issue of interpretation**

Furthermore, if you happen to have an unusual skill or ability it may actually be preferable to be seen as a performer or illusionist, which may reduce the likelihood of inducing fear in others and being labelled a freak. Providing people with the option to interpret what they witness as a 'trick' allows them to integrate and enjoy the experience without radically redefining their worldview, and even if they accept what they have seen as real they are less likely to feel entitled to a full explanation. According to magician and television performer David Blaine, who first became famous when he was filmed levitating on a New York City sidewalk, magic makes people vulnerable and allows them to recapture their childlike sense of wonder (Blaine 2002: 92). "When people really witness magic, they never forget it for the rest of their lives. ...Magic is an incredible art that in one mysterious moment can make you question everything" (Blaine 2002: 7). Blaine not only performs card tricks and illusions, but also engages in extraordinary feats of will and endurance that are difficult to believe, such as being buried alive in a clear glass coffin six feet below street-level for seven days (168 hours), being entombed in a six-ton block of Alaskan glacier ice for over three days (61 hours 40 minutes and 18 seconds), and standing upright on top of an 80 ft. high pillar for a day and a half (35 hours) with no food or sleep without falling off (Blaine 2002). He explains that these stunts are not only meant to challenge himself but actively involve the audience in confronting our

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<sup>115</sup> Qigong (pronounced "chee-goong") can be roughly translated as "energy work" and refers to a traditional healing method and form of internal exercise that originally developed in China (see McGee & Chow 1996; Ristimaki 2005).



collective fears, and thereby reinforce our common humanity – according to Blaine (2002: 180), “when someone does something truly extraordinary, we can all feel a little bit better about ourselves, a little prouder of being members of the human race.” However, the trouble with all professional performers is that you never know where reality ends and illusion begins, and the price we pay for the option of staying inside our comfort zone and assuming it’s all a trick is ultimately uncertainty about the true extent of human potential.

Although some people might prefer to rely purely on their own experience to draw conclusions about reality, the content of previous chapters has clearly demonstrated that framing, context, social roles, and implicit/automatic categorization can all affect interpretation, and through social performance, conceptual blending, and the power of suggestion we can affect what other people see and experience. Demonstrating special powers in a particular context can also be used to claim unique social roles, such as guru, healer, psychic, etc. However, the legitimacy of those roles or the explanation offered for certain skills, activities, and experiences may be less readily accepted because, unlike magician or illusionist, these roles often presuppose a particular belief system or rely on an interpretation of reality that is not widely understood. For example, claiming to be a ‘priest’ is relatively uncontroversial (assuming you have the relevant qualifications); however, claiming to be an ‘exorcist’ presupposes the existence of demons etc., which some people may not be willing to accept.

Similarly, the meaning and significance of an unusual or powerful personal experience may be interpreted differently depending on the way it is framed and facilitated. For example, there is an arm-testing procedure in several forms of alternative medicine that uses (involuntary) changes in physical resistance to diagnose allergies, food sensitivities, and energy imbalances in the body, and although it often seems incredibly effective in that context, a virtually identical exercise is also used in Qigong demonstrations, self-esteem seminars, and personal empowerment workshops to prove/demonstrate everything from the existence of an all-encompassing universal energy or life-force to the (metaphysical) power of positive/negative thinking and language (Ristimaki 2005; Jeffers 2007: 70-71). Although I do not wish to dispute any of these interpretations, and indeed some

people may argue that they are all interrelated as reflections of a common underlying truth, my point is that the same exercise is deliberately framed in different ways to serve a particular purpose, and the explanation provided has implications for how people understand and respond to that experience.

Derren Brown is another well-known television performer who has used his skills, which he describes as a mixture of magic, suggestions, psychology, misdirection, and showmanship (Brown 2005), to pass himself off as a psychic, inspire a belief in God among atheists, appear to speak on behalf of the dead, and lead people into vivid and engaging hallucinations, among other things.<sup>116</sup> He explicitly denies having any ‘paranormal’ abilities whatsoever and has built a successful career on publicly demonstrating (and exploiting) the tremendous power of tapping into people’s belief systems. Although he claims he is not interested in attacking anyone’s personal beliefs, he argues that:

Whether we believe in psychic ability, crystal energy, alien abduction, talking to the dead, or Christianity, we are rightly or wrongly buying into a very powerful belief system, [and] as intelligent human beings we should be prepared to question our beliefs and the people who encourage us to make life decisions based on the information they give us.

(Derren Brown, video clip 1).

So who do we trust and how do we decide what to believe in? When I began this research I was fairly certain I would realize if I was being ‘hypnotized’ because I associated it with specific social roles and a clearly defined (i.e. stereotypical) procedure; however, the more I learned about the power of suggestion in language and interaction the more examples I found of it being woven into different forms of discourse that mimic ordinary conversation.<sup>117</sup> Similar to David Blaine, the performances of Derren Brown cannot necessarily be taken at face value, especially on the basis of edited video clips; however, he often claims to be interacting with ordinary, unsuspecting people, and seems to have the ability to make them forget where they are going, willingly hand over their wallet, and fall asleep or go into a trance incredibly quickly – even over the phone (video clips 2,3,4,5). By exploiting

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<sup>116</sup> Various video clips demonstrating Derren Brown’s skills are available online.

<sup>117</sup> Although I have not engaged in a detailed analysis and comparison, I say *mimic* ordinary conversation because I suspect that aspects of attention, turn-taking, question/answer response pairs, etc. are premeditated to a greater extent than usual and are being carefully controlled by one participant in order to manipulate another.



people's pre-existing beliefs and the power of suggestion he can apparently lead people to believe that they cannot move or speak through the use of a homemade 'voodoo' doll, pay for expensive items using blank paper, and even make himself effectively invisible – all through casual conversation rather than a formal hypnotic induction (video clips 6,7,8). Although it will not work on everyone and most likely involves some form of implicit yet unintentional collaboration, the ability of skilled speakers like Derren Brown to capture people's attention, manipulate their minds, and lead them to behave in unexpected ways or experience extraordinary things would be a fascinating area of future research, and some linguists have already begun to explore this area. For example, Wales (2008) has analysed 'unnatural conversations' such as talking to the dead and Sweester (2000) discusses the Christian rituals of mass and holy communion in terms of conceptual blending and integrated action. Techniques such as 'cold-reading' and 'conversational hypnosis' also deserve more detailed linguistic analysis, because increased understanding of these subtle and deliberate forms of interpersonal manipulation might offer additional insight into political propaganda, the powerful language of cult leaders, and religious rituals that involve a direct personal experience of the divine.

### **'Crazy' ideas vs. 'realistic' goals**

The deeper you dig into the issue of (im)possibility and alternative interpretations of reality the more difficult it becomes to interpret your own experience and evaluate the social knowledge claims of other people. As a result of this research I have been exposed to so many 'crazy' ideas, alternative explanations, and inspiring individuals that I no longer know who or what to believe. Swimming 57.5 meters under three feet of solid ice in nothing but shorts, working 52 different jobs in a single year, and trading one red paperclip for a house may not seem like 'realistic' goals to most people; nevertheless, they have all been accomplished by people who believed these things were possible.<sup>118</sup> According to psychologist and self-help author Susan Jeffers (2007: 68-69), "nothing is realistic or unrealistic – there is only what we think about any given situation"; however, the power of positive thinking is one of the most difficult concepts for people to grasp because there is often an automatic assumption that being positive and hoping for the best is somehow *unrealistic*. She

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<sup>118</sup> Dutchman Wim Hoff set a new World Record in 2000 – see Ice Swim in website references. Canadian Sean Aiken worked a different job every week for a year (2007) – see 52 jobs website. Canadian Kyle MacDonald traded a paperclip for a house (2005/2006) – see Red Paperclip website.

argues that upon inspection this is pure madness because studies have shown that over 90% of what we worry about never actually happens, but what we expect affects our experience and ultimately we create our own reality (Jeffers 2007: 68-69).

I have forced myself to seriously consider ‘crazy’ ideas and tried to remain open to unexpected possibilities. In addition to firewalking, spoon-bending, and snapping arrows with my throat, as part of my fieldwork I also participated in a ‘psychic development and paranormal investigator’s training course’ conducted in North Wales. The facilitator was actively trying to convince people to practise skills they did not necessarily believe they had by framing the ‘paranormal’ in terms of accepted scientific knowledge about the known limitations and natural variation of normal human sense perception.<sup>119</sup> By systematically demonstrating that there are *real* sounds we cannot hear, smells we do not detect, and wavelengths of light (such as infrared and ultraviolet) that we know exist but cannot see, he was able to suggest a plausible explanation for so-called ‘psychic’ abilities as simply a natural extension of ordinary sense perception, which could therefore be developed through diligent practice of special sensory exercises.

I have watched a man fold a six-inch nail in half almost effortlessly, heard convincing explanations of how the subconscious mind may inhibit or interfere with the full expression of human potential, and read numerous accounts of people who seem to have discovered or developed extraordinary abilities. For example, a man named Jack Schwarz can allegedly push a knitting needle through his arm without experiencing any pain, prevent himself from bleeding, and carry red-hot coals in his bare hands without burning – he claims that we all have the potential to develop these abilities, but due to fear or lack of belief the rest of us are consistently choosing to live at a sub-normal level (Sternfield 1992: 144-145). As a result of this research, I now struggle to make sense of the accounts I read and the competing explanations that are offered for events I observe/experience. By seriously investigating levitation I have learned at least three different ways to fake it, but that still does not prove that the real thing is impossible. Now that I recognize how different assumptions and

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<sup>119</sup> Although I initially hoped to include my observations of the psychic development course in the main body of this thesis, the facilitator expressed reservations about being recorded and the course was somewhat expensive and inconvenient to regularly attend.



belief systems affect the perception of (im)possibility, I refuse to allow myself to accept one interpretation of reality over another just because it makes me more comfortable, so at times I am forced to seriously consider the implications of adopting a dramatically different worldview.

### **Imagination, intention, & (inter)action**

In addition to what we can or cannot do in the present moment, worldviews also affect what people perceive as ‘realistic’ possibilities for the future. According to Berger and Luckman (2002: 49), “what is taken for granted as knowledge in the society comes to be coextensive with the knowable, or at any rate provides the framework within which anything not yet known will come to be known in the future.” The world is not flat, *and it never has been*. We know that now because, among other things, we have developed the ability to fly around the earth and we have seen our little blue planet from space. However, for hundreds of years the world was ‘effectively’ flat and human flight/space-travel was ‘effectively’ impossible – not only due to lack of technology but also due to self-limiting beliefs about human potential and the nature of reality. Therefore, the challenge is to recognize, with humility and optimism, that the obvious and self-evident ‘truths’ of today are just as much a product of our current cultural models, limited experience, and incomplete (if not entirely misinterpreted) perception of reality.

Based on vague general background knowledge about aviation technology, space flight, and previous manned missions to the moon, people seem to have little difficulty accepting the idea of a manned mission to Mars as a ‘realistic’ possibility, whereas the idea of sending a person back in time is often considered less plausible, despite the fact that neither has actually been done yet. However, it is only by believing in the possibility of time travel that we will invest the necessary time, energy, and other resources into developing the knowledge, skills, and technology to achieve it. The same basic argument applies to things like dowsing, telepathy, energy healing, and the ability to see auras – people will not attempt to acquire these skills if they do not believe they exist, and the different explanations offered for these apparent abilities change the way people respond to individuals who seem to have them. When I talk about walking on fire, people occasionally bring up the idea of walking on water, which for various reasons is considered much more miraculous;

however, I often point out that anyone who believes in the Bible already has an authoritative account that it is possible, and in that source Jesus insists it is possible for other people too (Matthew 14:22-33):<sup>120</sup>

The ability to swim, ride a bike, and even walk upright on *land* with confidence and stability all require sustained effort and take time to develop, but few people seem to have the patience or incentive to practise walking on water or walking through walls. This is not surprising because, similar to the arrow-breaking exercise discussed in the previous chapter, most people do not believe these things are ‘realistically’ or ‘scientifically’ possible to begin with. The fear of pain, injury, or humiliation may also be an issue, but for many people *faith* is an effective way to overcome fear, doubt, or disbelief. Whether based on belief in a higher power or faith in the laws of physics, the right explanation can give people the confidence to ‘feel the fear and do it anyway’ – and according to Jeffers (2007: 13), “at the bottom of every one of your fears is simply the fear that you can’t handle whatever life may bring you.”

### **With God all things are possible (?)**

Some people say that with God all things are possible,<sup>121</sup> but how many have enough faith to live their lives *as if* that were true? As a result of this research I have recently begun to seriously consider the possibility of biblical miracles occurring in the modern world, and several examples have been brought to my attention by people who genuinely believe that they have witnessed or participated in a miraculous event and personally experienced the presence of God. Although I was not raised as a Christian and do not regularly attend religious services of any kind, I am impressed by the power of faith and interested in how various interpretations of widely-known religious concepts (e.g. God, angels, demons, etc.) and culturally-salient stories affect human behaviour and interaction.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> This argument is based on a literal interpretation of the Bible (i.e. assuming that these events actually happened), which does not necessarily reflect the beliefs of all Christians.

<sup>121</sup> Matthew 19:26.

<sup>122</sup> This applies to Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Ba’hai, and other shared stories/belief systems as well. The only reason I have chosen to frame this discussion in terms of ‘biblical’ miracles is because the examples I have recently been exposed to involve evangelical Christians invoking the name of Jesus Christ and a related concept of God.



At the moment, the most dramatic example I am aware of is the so-called 'Florida Outpouring' surrounding itinerant revivalist preacher Todd Bentley,<sup>123</sup> which by all accounts began as a five-day meeting at a small local church on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008, but quickly became a major international event and was extended indefinitely as thousands of people were drawn to the tiny town of Lakeland (Florida, USA) by reports of healing miracles. Although there is no promise that all who come will be healed, there are numerous claims of cancerous tumours disappearing, deaf ears 'popping open,' the blind regaining their sight, and people in wheelchairs getting up to walk. People are talking about seeing angels, sensing the Holy Spirit or the presence of God in a tangible way, and casting out the 'demons' of addiction in a literal rather than metaphorical sense. Over the past two months<sup>124</sup> this extraordinary gathering has outgrown four different venues, including a 7000-seat convention centre, and has attracted local, national, and international media attention (e.g. Bearden & Townsend 2008; Rhee 2008). It is being broadcast live on a religious satellite channel called God TV, and can currently be viewed for free worldwide every evening via the associated website ([www.god.tv/florida](http://www.god.tv/florida)). I first heard about Todd Bentley and the Florida Outpouring from a friend who is directly involved with Fresh Fire Ministries and was in Lakeland at the time, so I also received a written first-hand account of my friend's personal observations and experiences.

There is enough linguistic data in the content, media coverage, personal testimonies, and alternative interpretations of this event to easily spawn another PhD thesis, so I will not even attempt a preliminary analysis of it here. However, what interests me most at the moment is how people make sense of claims that clearly reflect a different reality and the profound implications of adopting a different worldview. I have watched hours of online video, received first-hand accounts from my personal friends, and read various news articles, individual testimonies, and alternative interpretations online, yet I still cannot fully understand or explain what is happening in Florida. I have considered the claims made by Todd Bentley about prophetic visions, the presence of angels, hearing the voice of God, and people being possessed

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<sup>123</sup> Todd Bentley is the founder of Fresh Fire Ministries ([www.freshfire.ca](http://www.freshfire.ca)), an organization devoted to 'power evangelism' and 'healing revival' on the basis of an intimate personal relationship with Jesus Christ, prophetic visions, and God confirming His word with miracles, signs, and wonders.

<sup>124</sup> April-May 2008. From May 26<sup>th</sup> onwards these meetings have been held (7 nights/week) in a structure that seats up to 10,000 people. They are now scheduled to continue until Aug. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008.



by demons – however, none of this makes sense within my current belief system.<sup>125</sup> On the one hand, as a result of my research, I can clearly see how people’s belief systems and desperation/hope could be exploited through mass conditioning and the power of suggestion to create *the impression* of a powerful personal experience of God’s presence – and if this actually produced physical healing or a meaningful positive change in people’s lives then that would still be extraordinary and worth investigating from a linguistic perspective. On the other hand, maybe angels and demons exist; Todd Bentley is not hallucinating or deliberately deceiving people; and everything he says is true.<sup>126</sup> I don’t know; all I have to work with are accounts of other people’s personal experience and conflicting claims about reality. The first interpretation is much easier to integrate within my current worldview and belief system, but I cannot completely dismiss the other alternative simply because the implications make me uncomfortable. I believe in the power of faith, but not blind faith, and although I do not get the impression that Todd Bentley is deliberately trying to deceive people, I’m still not willing to buy into his belief system on the basis of what I have seen and read so far. Nevertheless, if I accept that everything I know about reality is provisional and subject to revision on the basis of new evidence and/or experiences, then I must find a way to remain simultaneously sceptical and open-minded towards other ways of seeing the world.

### Conclusion

I realize that even *considering* the possibility of time travel, walking through walls, or the existence of angels will seem ‘crazy’ to some people, but accepting or rejecting these ideas involves essentially the same sense-making process discussed in previous chapters – we all draw a line between the possible and impossible somewhere, the issue is where and why. I do not believe that absolutely anything is possible, and I do not believe that all explanations or interpretations are equally valid and useful. What I’m trying to illustrate with all these ‘crazy’ examples is that there is still a great deal of variation in the perception of (im)possibility and people’s

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<sup>125</sup> A friend of mine actually asked me in complete seriousness, “Did you see the demons manifesting last night?” She continued her account with, “I am not sure what shows up on God TV compared to what we see, but you could see it flash in their eyes and then they start making angry scrunchy weird faces at Todd, so Todd casts it out and they get healed...” I was watching the same people via the online video, but I did not see the demons or the flash in their eyes.

<sup>126</sup> These two interpretations represent an artificial and unnecessary (either/or) dichotomy – deliberate deception and manipulation vs. sincere and accurate claims about the nature of reality. There are additional possibilities that are equally plausible in between these two extreme alternatives.



beliefs about reality, and those differences are important because they influence the way we interact with each other, determine the kind of things we are willing to try, and ultimately, affect what we actually achieve in the world.

This is where my research into (im)possibility and the pragmatics of empowerment has led me. I am still deeply curious about the real and perceived limits of human potential, but also more confused and uncertain about my own interpretation of reality than ever before. In this thesis I hope to have demonstrated how framing can be used to influence perception and behaviour in social interaction and highlighted the power of language to create imaginary realities that produce positive real world results through conceptual blending and integrated action. I have also argued that in some situations the interpersonal expression of fear can be understood in terms of social performance/impression management and the subjective experience of fear can be actively redefined. Throughout the analysis I have explored various aspects of the sense-making process, including implicit categorization, social roles/authority, and the social nature of knowledge claims or shared belief systems. Through participant-observation in three distinct contexts I have attempted to identify some of the most useful and adaptable aspects of practical empowerment and suggest that these language-based strategies can be effectively applied in other situations. This final chapter has discussed some of those potential applications in relation to a few inspiring individuals and the many intriguing options, possibilities, and experiences I am still struggling to understand and cannot fully explain. I have gained a great deal of insight into language, interaction, and the negotiation of a shared sense of reality through this research; however, all my claims, observations, and explanations are ultimately still subjective, temporary, and open to interpretation. I will inevitably continue to question the perceived limits of human potential and actively explore alternative interpretations of reality, and my hope is that the content of this thesis will inspire all who read it to do the same.

*~ The End ~*

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## Websites <sup>127</sup>

Conway Centre: [www.conwaycentre.co.uk](http://www.conwaycentre.co.uk)

Quantum Leaps Lodge: [www.quantumleaps.ca](http://www.quantumleaps.ca)

UK Firewalk: [www.ukfirewalk.com](http://www.ukfirewalk.com) & [www.ukfirewalk.co.uk](http://www.ukfirewalk.co.uk)

Mental Combat: [www.mentalcombat.co.uk](http://www.mentalcombat.co.uk)

Brian Tracy: [www.briantracy.com](http://www.briantracy.com)

Berkeley Baby Center: <http://babycenter.berkeley.edu/VisualCliff.htm>

Jim MacLeran: [www.jimmacleran.com](http://www.jimmacleran.com)

Israeli Committee Against House Demolition: [www.icahd.org](http://www.icahd.org)

Language and Ecology Research Forum: [www.ecoling.net](http://www.ecoling.net)

*A Crude Awakening* [film]: [www.oilcrashmovie.com](http://www.oilcrashmovie.com)

*The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour* [film]: [www.11thhourfilm.com](http://www.11thhourfilm.com) & [www.leonardodicaprio.org](http://www.leonardodicaprio.org)

## Derren Brown video clips: <sup>128</sup>

1. Messiah [TV special in 8 parts]: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJ02I6QyagM>

2. Trains of Thought: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bkleuxpvxY>

3. Phone Booth 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76mSSYaU3j4>

4. Phone Booth 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76mSSYaU3j4>

5. Wallets & Watches: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR4y5iX4uRY>

6. Voodoo: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW2yKINFFuU>

7. Blank Paper: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGao5DoZWzo&feature=related>

8. Invisible Man: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPZH07THejo>

9. Psychic/Cold Reading: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btP\\_vy5cQq4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btP_vy5cQq4)

Wim Hoff – Ice Swim: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfCsSDiPZxk>

Sean Aiken – 52 jobs in a year: [www.oneweekjob.com](http://www.oneweekjob.com)

Kyle MacDonald – Red Paperclip: <http://oneredpaperclip.blogspot.com/>

Todd Bently – ‘Florida Outpouring’: [www.freshfire.ca](http://www.freshfire.ca) & [www.god.tv/florida](http://www.god.tv/florida)

Interview [video]: <http://www.tbo.com/video/xml/MGBUNESXPFF.html>

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<sup>127</sup> All of these websites were accessible as of June 2008; however they may change over time.

<sup>128</sup> The original sources for these clips are Derren Brown’s television shows & specials on Channel 4 (UK): *Mind Control*, *Tricks of the Mind*, *Messiah*, etc.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Data sources & demographic details.

Appendix B: Transcription conventions.

Appendix C: Conway video transcript.

Appendix D: Hypno video transcript.

Appendix E: UK Firewalk video transcript.

Appendix F: Various consent forms.



**Appendix A: Summary of original data sources & demographic details**

	<b>Source</b>	<b>Methodology &amp; type of data</b>	
<b>EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION</b>	<i>Conway Centre</i>	participant observation & field notes	audio/video recording
<b>HYPNOTHERAPY</b>	<i>Private session with Dr. Alphonse Joseph</i>	participation & self-reflection	audio/video recording
<b>FIREWALKING</b>	<i>Quantum Leaps Lodge</i>	participant observation & field notes	website <sup>129</sup>
	<i>UK Firewalk</i>	seminar video clips	website <sup>130</sup>
	<i>Mental Combat</i>	seminar video clips	website <sup>131</sup>

**Conway Centre demographic details**

<b>STAFF</b>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
<i>Adults</i>	10	5	<b>15</b>
<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>			
<i>Adults</i>	10	3	<b>13</b>
<i>Children (10-16 yrs.)</i>	89	76	<b>160</b>

**Additional demographic details**

	<u>Participants</u>	<u>Facilitators</u>
<b>HYPNOTHERAPY</b> <i>Hypno video</i>	Tom Ristimaki	Dr. Alphonse Joseph
<b>FIREWALKING</b> <i>Quantum Leaps Lodge</i>	15 adults (7 Male 8 Female)	Brian & Annette Olynek
<i>Mental Combat video</i>	20+ Adults (mixed M/F)	Terri Ann Laws & Nick Lees
<i>UK Firewalk video</i>	20+ Adults (mixed M/F)	Scott Bell

<sup>129</sup> Quantum Leaps Lodge website: [www.quantumleaps.ca](http://www.quantumleaps.ca)

<sup>130</sup> UK Firewalk website: [www.ukfirewalk.com](http://www.ukfirewalk.com) & [www.ukfirewalk.co.uk](http://www.ukfirewalk.co.uk)

<sup>131</sup> Mental Combat website: [www.mentalcombat.co.uk](http://www.mentalcombat.co.uk)

## Appendix B: Transcription conventions

(adapted from Schiffrin 1994: 431-433)

- . falling intonation followed by a noticeable pause, (end of a declarative sentence).
- ? rising intonation followed by a noticeable pause, (end of an interrogative sentence).
- , continuing or clause-final intonation; a shorter pause than above,
- ! animated tone or exclamatory intonation.
- ... noticeably extended pause, (less than three seconds).
- [cut] indicates an omission from the extract.
- ... (7) extended pause timed in seconds, (more than three seconds).
- italics* emphatic stress
- !!~!! indicates laughter, (judged either *nervous* or *PLAYFUL/SYMPATHETIC*).
- (tone) researcher's subjective interpretation of tone of voice, (e.g. *serious, playful*).
- [move] non-verbal features of context, including gaze, interaction, and movement.
- {???) inaudible or uncertain transcription; may be filled with {*my best guess*}.
- // ~ // insertion point and/or overlapping speech.
- = the speaker's utterance continues without pause on the next line.
- “ ” speaking on behalf of another person, (i.e. in another 'voice').
- A: letters indicate specific speakers/subjects in a particular extract; (B,C, etc.).
- Grp: group response; specific speakers unidentifiable.
- Staff: trained staff facilitator at the Conway Centre.
- H: hypnotherapist (i.e. Doctor of Clinical Hypnotherapy).
- X: hypnotherapy subject/patient.

### Examples:

- A: Whoa! [*nervous wobble*]  
 Have you got another rope I can hold on to?... (5 sec) (high voice)  
 Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

(Conway video)

- P: I don't like this.... I can't do it Miss. I just can't...  
 Staff: You can't? You can't what?  
 Is this important? It's not *real*. Don't worry about it!

(Field notes)

- X: So it was described in terms of sleep, //although it's... //  
 H: // In terms of sleep //  
 H: Although there, in hypnosis you will be *more* aware than you, ...than you...  
 can be in your conscious mind. ...The difference being that, it'll be a  
 specific awareness.

(Hypno video)

But it's pretty illogical to think, when your windpipe's {*up against*} a pointed arrow, you just wouldn't do it, would you? It's nonsensical. I'm pretty logical, I've seen arrows go into things and kill things. I've got a genuine fear there.

(Scott Bell, UK Firewalk video)



## Appendix C: Conway video transcript

(selected extracts)

Description: Video of a group of six adult male participants engaged in various activities on the high ropes-course at the Conway Centre in North Wales (filmed by the researcher, 2006). They are on a one-day visit to the Centre as part of a trades-based community apprenticeship project, and the focus of their activities is on team-building and challenging themselves to step outside their natural ‘comfort zone.’ (A) is their current employer and in his mid-forties, the other five participants (B,C,D, etc) are all in their early twenties, and they are being guided by one male staff member from the Conway Centre (Staff).

### -----[15ft. Catwalk]-----

(3:05) ---

- A: Does it work when you hold that? [*gripping the rope overhead*]  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
A: Whoa! [*nervous wobble*]  
Have you got another rope I can hold on to?... (5 sec) (high voice)  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
Staff: Just make your way along now.  
A: [*takes one step, then stops*] – ahh...  
B: //Go on.//  
Grp: ///!! LAUGHTER !!!  
A: D’y’know, I don’ like the look of that one already – [= 50ft. catwalk]  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
A: {*the rope’s tight there like?*}  
C: it is, yeah  
D: {*you can’t go*}  
B: Hold the rope on the top. That’s what I was doing...

(3:30) ---

- A: [*looks directly down at onlookers*] – My balance is not too good boys!  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !! – Go on! [*overlapping speakers*]  
A: [*hesitates, and then walks carefully across without another word*]...  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !! ...  
C: Star jump.  
B: Come on (A)... (5 sec.)  
Grp: Go on! Yay! Well done (A)

(3:50) ---

- A: I don’ know about the backward bit. [*i.e. walking backwards*]  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
A: Yeah, is that the... // {*if you want?*} //  
Grp: // !! LAUGHTER !! //  
Staff: Yeah, this is all about challengin’ yourself...  
A: [*points at B*] – well as you did it, I’ve gotta have a go...  
... (7 sec.) [*one step back, hand still on tree*] – ahh, no...  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
A: ... (5 sec.) [*tries again while holding the rope*] – ah no,  
don’ know about that, gonna go this way [*i.e. forward*]... (4 sec.)  
Staff: He’s gonna go that way hopping.  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !! {*unclear speech*} with your eyes closed...  
A: [*starts walking*]... (9 sec.) – [*middle of catwalk*]

(4:34) ---

Staff: sitting down's //not easy now //

A: //pffffftttttt... // I can't move...

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

Staff: Did you see the temptation to grab this rope?

B: // yeah //

C: // yeah //

Staff: Don't do that 'cause if you did slip you'd go down and the rope goes up...  
And then you'd burn yourself.

A: {???

Staff: Try to sit down and we'll give you a bit of slack.

A: N' I don't want any slack.

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

-----[ CUT ]-----

-----[50ft. Catwalk]-----

(13:05) ---

B: [*participant about to come down*] – that's a bit too much slack I think.

Grp: {???

C: Yeah, you're jumping off now...

D: {???) let go of this bit of rope here

E: Off ya go, g'on!... (6 sec.)

B: [*deep breath + a big sigh = exaggerated; audible from the ground*]

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

E: Go on!

D: Geronimo!... (

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

C: Do you want a push (B)?

B: ... can I use the rope?

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

(13:25) ---

B: Shit. ...My knees are wobbling!

Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

B: I'm gonna lower myself down ok... [*i.e. squat and slip off the edge*]

Staff: sit sit down if you want

B: I'm gonna lower myself down yeah

D: it takes a lot of balls yeah

Grp: {???

E: yaaaay... [*as B drops off the beam above*]

D: fuckin' hell look at the trees!

Staff: it's ok.

-----[ CUT ]-----

-----[50ft. Catwalk]-----

(21:36) ---

A: [*stamps his foot*] – Dunno about my shoes... (5 sec.) (serious tone)

A: ffwaa... I don' like the look of this at all. (serious tone)

A: [*takes one step, but doesn't let go of tree; quickly pulls back*]

C: you're there now so that's the worst part {over}

(21:49) ---

A: [*takes a step forward, still holding on to tree*]



- A: [looks straight down at the group] – aw, I can't let go! (high voice)  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !! ... (4 sec)  
C: You can do it (A), I'm // sure. //  
B: //go on (A)! //  
D: //Yeah, //  
B: We've got you down here... (6 sec.)  
A: Dunno about this... [talking to himself, trying to take the first step]  
B: Hell of a thing though...  
C: it is innit.
- (22:08) ---  
Staff: (A), rather than lettin' go *and* walking same time, just do the lettin' go thing first until you're happy with that, and then think about the walking  
A: [seems to be thinking about it] – pffftt... [giggles, looks down]  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
A: [looks forward, lets go of tree] – phew!...
- (22:30) ---  
A: Hold tight (B).  
B: alright  
C: a bit tighter yeah?  
A: Anything happens to me you're sacked! (high voice)  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!  
A: ... (4 sec.) [one step] – Aw, d'y'know, this is high... (serious/quiet)  
[glances down] – I can feel my legs going already=  
=and I haven't moved yet! [glances down] (high voice)  
... (10 sec.) [takes one slow step]  
C: Well done (A).  
D: {nice one}  
Grp: {???)  
A: [starts walking slowly; goes all the way across without another word]  
Grp: {???) [talking quietly amongst themselves]
- (23:13) ---  
B: (Q) will be proud! [referring to A's partner; A reaches the far side]  
C: ... (6 sec.) Well done (A)!  
Staff: Nice one (A) ...y'alright?  
Grp: {???)  
E: [to Me] – Have you got this on camera? 'cause he ain't doing it again!  
D: no – !! LAUGHTER !! {???)
- (23:32) ---  
A: Bit more slack. Just a little bit, just so I can turn around.  
A: Not too much! (high voice)  
C: Is that ok? ... (10 sec)  
E: Is this the highest one here yeah? [to Staff]  
Staff: N' the trapeze is about the same height.  
E: yeah, cool.  
A: [walks back to middle in silence] – I'm coming down!... (5 sec.)  
B: Go on then, jump!  
Grp: !! LAUGHTER !!

-----[ end of extract ]-----

## Appendix D: Hypnotherapy transcript

(selected extracts from the video)

Description: Personal video of a private hypnotherapy session, conducted Aug. 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006 with Dr. Alphonse Joseph DCH,<sup>132</sup> in Kimberley, BC, Canada. The patient is the researcher, Tom Ristimaki, and this session took place in the living room of the therapist's home. The patient is sitting on a comfortable reclining couch with a footrest, and the therapist is sitting in a chair facing the patient from the side. [Filming is standard practice for this therapist – the camera is focussed on the patient and the therapist is sitting off-screen to the patient's right.]

The entire session (including pre-hypnosis conversation) is approximately three hours long and was recorded on two mini-DV (digital video) tapes. This is an edited transcript that focuses specifically on extracts that are discussed in this thesis, including pre-hypnosis, the initial induction procedure, and guided relaxation.

### -----[ pre-hypnosis conversation ]-----

(3:16) ---

H: Let's talk about physical, energetic (*unclear*) what are we looking at there?

X: um.. well, another potential starting point was was the idea of healing

H: mm, hmm

X: um.. on a physical or energetic level just, wholeness and accepting my current condition but... in in, as a whole. Accepting where I'm at, but uh...

H: What is your current condition?

X: Well, I think it's... I wasn't, y'know focussing specifically on a specific problem, but that idea of accepting // the way it is...

H: But they're your-but they're your, but they're your words.

X: yeah

H: So how do you perceive your current condition? This is what I do, it's a, as a pre-hypnosis you set up a pre-hypnosis for me so it's wonderful. *!! laughter !!*

X: oh, ok.. *!! laughter !!*

H: It's ok, these are the things that I would've normally asked anyway, so it's wond... it's great.

X: oh, *!! laughter !!*

X: Um... yeah, I think my current physical condition ties in with the the mind-body stuff, so that, um... (5 sec.) I feel like I'm in, in good shape and relatively well connected with my body but... at the same time it's an area for potential improvement. There's, there's things I would like to change, um... y'know, right now – I have had problems with my back and hips in the past, but right now they're, they've been ok for awhile, so there's healing on that kind of level, um...

H: Why do you think that there's healing now?

X: um.... Well there's been... there's been improvement for the past year, but why now //and not another time// I'm...

H: // ok, alright //

H: ...nothing jumped right out at you. It's ok.

---

<sup>132</sup> Dr. Joseph is certified through the American Institute of Clinical Hypnotherapy, located in Irvine California.



X: Sort of that idea, that I don't want to fight with my body, I want to accept it, but then... still give it permission to.. change.

H: So you understand that you have been fighting with your body?

X: ...probably. I've been resisting, frustrated with it //...not doing what I want it to do.

H: mm-hmm

H: ok, I just gotta make a few notes while, // while we're...

X: ok

-----[ CUT ]-----

(6:26) ---

X: Um., anyway... those were, those were just the three things I potentially thought, //y'know... somewhere to start //

H: //would be, // ...would be focus areas, ok, alright

X: I'm open to going wherever it goes... um... and then... in reflecting on the whole idea of hypnosis, and what we were going to be doing, um... some things that I thought about were, um also relating to my research on sort of limitations // and how it might relate, to hypnosis...

H: mm-hmm

X: I was thinking about the distinction between psychological limitations // =

H: ok

X: = and physical limitations, and down here in the questions I'm not even, I'm not even sure if that, if there *is* a distinction, but... y'know,

H: I, I suh'spo, I suppose you could, work that as a distinction, but.. I, I personally don't believe that, they're so interconnected that it's, y' you can divide them and look at it one way, you can divide them and look at it the other but they are going to be one and the same...

X: mm..

H: ...personally

X: yeah.

-----[ CUT ]-----

(9:00) ---

X: and then I was also thinking about, um... sort of, psychic abilities or heightened sense perceptions.. and how those relate to.. hypnosis. Um... and, y'know in in terms of, of tapping into other levels of awareness and, y'know, perhaps...

H: I, I believe that you, personally I believe that other people have a sense of, uh... intuition.. that they explore uh, on various levels throughout their day or else y'know, at the spur of the moment you decide to go here, you decide to go there... what happens during that time? ..I don't know. And I don't, and I haven't explored whether hypnosis would... give you, y'know like if you're projecting out, if you're naturally inclined to project out onto others and you're intuitive that way, I believe that, it would focus that intuition. ...I believe what this does, is allows that sub-consc, hypno, hypnosis will allow that sub-conscious part of you that has that.. deeper knowing of your.. greater well being.. to be... float, to be able to float to the surface so that the conscious mind doesn't interfere and, sort of, critique everything that's going on in and around you.

X: mm-hmm

H: So, yeah I just sorta believe that – is it intuition? Um.... Uh, I don't, I don't know. It's just, I believe what it does do is just allow that to rise to the surface and be more forefront than your conscious mind would normally allow.

X: mm-hmm

H: Y'know what I mean, do you consider that intuition? I don't know; that'd be up t, for you to decide...

X: Yeah, well that's something that I

H: 'cause I wonder if that that intuition that we feel we have is just that deeper part of ourselves that knows what's, what it is we need to do, why we need to do it – is that just our subconscious mind in action getting a chance to float through when, when our conscious mind is not in its normal state? So...

X: mm.. so, hypnosis is a way of, sort of, ...sort of sidestepping // the conscious mind?//

H: //so that yeah, yeah,//

H: so that yeah, yeah, just changes position so that um... y'know, you're now not constantly criticizing absolutely everything you do, and that's what your conscious mind does. It's, it's uh, it's like a little tape-recorder y'know in your life and it plays its own set of tapes, uh... repeating tapes, because we're interacting so much that, on that level we build up patterns that way, but we also have subconscious patterns that are floating underneath and sometimes they're opposed – sometimes they're in alignment, which makes for a very peacefull well-being state in life //

X: Right

H: =but when they're... one on the conscious level is doing this and another is rotating in the opposite direction or, off to the side, and they're, they're not in alignment and you're, you're gonna feel conflict.

X: mm..

H: And are they ever going to be always in the same direction? I don't think so. I don't think we're wired that way; not most of us anyway.

X: Right

H: So what else have we got here?...

-----[ CUT ]-----

(13:10) ---

X: In a session of hypnosis are we exploring or, tapping into one mind, like one person's individual mind, or something that's beyond the individual? Does that make sense?

H: mm-hmm, it does... It's one I've puzzled over myself...

H: I've seen people experience that, that deeper level of self, or even what appears to be beyond self, uh... some people spontaneously have regressed into... past life experience. Is it real or not real? I, personally, I do believe that it's real. Does it matter? I don't really care. What matters is that, during during that, that shift uh.. and in relaxation, y'know where they take themselves to a point or place... to adjust to a new change that they're looking for or an identification of why they're doing what they're doing... and, and able to obtain change just as they look at it from a different view point just by looking at it from a different viewpoint

X: mm-hmm

H: That's all, that's, y'know that's my priority, as a therapist is to, allow somebody to go to a place where they can either identify or, and/or create change, for their well-being.

X: ok

H: If it's real or... in, in a conscious perceptual state; I don't care.

X: mm... just as long as they get to that //change //

H: //it's just as long...

H: As long as they get um... the desired beneficial result. And that's why during hypnosis we may use things like: see, hear, feel, imagine

X: ok

H: if this was this, what would it be? What, because what we're really trying to get you to do is focus on, on you and to be in-tune with you. Does it have to be real? Y'see I



find that some people go to very real, tangible, mind-tangible places y'know, they, that the conscious mind sort of takes a peek at it an' "oh yeah, I remember that part" and sometimes it'll go places where the conscious mind says y'know, "how can that be? I don't remember that? Why are you thinking about this? You don't know anything about that..." It, it'll do that and it'll sort of pull you in and out of that hypnotic state, or that deeply relaxed state, 'cause that's all hypnosis is. It's a heightened sense of relaxation. Different than meditation; not much different, but different, ok? Different brain-wave patterns than meditation in hypnosis, and uh... and uh.. a highly suggestible state.

X: And different than dreaming as well?

H: Different than dreaming as well. Yes. So it's, Hypnosis is linked to a sleep state, uh, just through wording originally, when it was developed, hypnosis was, basically talking as uh, in regards to sleep basically. Poor word choice when it was originally used, y'know when the, when the process was originally laid out, 'cause it looks very much like a sleep state. Y'know, people look like they're, once their eyes close, deeply relaxed and in a peaceful sleep.

X: So it was described in terms of sleep, // although it's... //

H: // In terms of sleep //

H: Although there, in hypnosis you will be *more* aware than you, ..than you.. can be in your conscious mind. ..The difference being that, it'll be a specific awareness.

X: ok

H: so if you're, your minds not going to wander to banking and here and do this, y'know, you might have some things that are floating around, but it won't be that million things that floats around in your conscious mind, oh yeah, I'm here doing hypnosis session, then wherever, I gotta go and then I gotta get the banking done and then I gotta write this report for... whatever, y'know?

H: So all these things aren't sort of floating through at the same time. There'll be, ..y'know, you can take that sort of thousand thoughts that float through, they might be focused down into 10, 5, sometimes even one very specific thought. And you'll focus on that, for that moment in time. It's a heightened, focussed, sense of relaxation.

X: ..ok.

-----[ CUT ]-----

(23:27) ---

H: It's following the process, that will allow you, to experience the process. If,

X: ok

H: If your conscious mind says, oh yeah, well, y'know that's, I don't agree with this or I don't... so I'm not going to do that part, but I'm gonna do.. this.

X: mm-hmm

H: That'll *block* the process. But if your sub-conscious mind says, ok, maybe I can't do it that way but I can do it *this* way, and you still follow the process but, y'know you do it in your own format, that's, that's a workable thing. But re, but refusal to work is a personal barrier.

X: right

H: y'know ok, if I asked you to, if I asked you to sit on a cloud and float, and, you say, that's ridiculous. That's ok it's ridiculous, but can you imagine to sit on a cloud? Well, y'know, if we want to we all *can* do that; it's will we do it or not.

X: mm.. will we go along with..

H: Will we go along. And that's what we *will* be doing in hypnosis. I'll be, I'll be guiding you in ways, and showing you a stepping process, first to relax your physical body,

and then I'll show you a stepping process and how relax your mental mind, so that it works down into a place that we consider to be in a state of hypnosis.

-----[ CUT ]-----

(26:17) ---

H: I'll *guide* the session. Who will control the session? You will *control* the session. ...I only take the session where you go with it. Ok? I'm not going to try and force you to go.. into uh... into a place and town in Wales. I might ask you to go there, just to, to use it to heighten your sense of relaxation. But if you choose not to go there, well, y'know, I'm not going to come over here and swat you with a stick and say "Alright Tom, get goin' man you're suppose to be there!"

X: Right

H: You, you will control. I'll guide, you control. You go or you don't go. For me it's uh... y'know, I have the advantage that, I have no.. attachment to your session one way or the other where it goes, or whether it goes at all even. ...That, that's the great advantage I've got, y'know. It doesn't matter to me. You either want to play in the session or you don't want to play, and that's, and it's all good.

-----[ CUT ]-----

(31:00) ---

X: so.. could I uh, go to the washroom?

H: oh, you gotta go to the washroom and so do I before we start.

X: Yeah, at some point

H: Well, we'll, just go in. You know where it's at, right down at the end of the hall on your left.

X: Yeah.

~ [toilet break] ~

H: So, one of the things uh, during during the session Tom, that sometimes I'll be, I may ask you to get in touch with your body, your body may, um.. I want you to *talk* from that part of your body as if the body's talking rather than, you'll do the verbal communication part, but you'll, I want you to *talk* as if your body's doing the talking, that part of specific part of your body

X: sort of personify that part

H: And, uh, I'll be talking *to that part of the body*. I may or may not go there. It'll depend on how the session goes. Um...

(12 seconds of silence~ rustling papers etc.)

-----[ Start of the hypnotic induction procedure ]-----

H: Uh... I'll just get you to straighten out both feet. Your legs. Mm-hmmGet your body nice and straight and as comfortable as you can be there. Just relax your hands on your lap. Ok, uncross your fingers... Lay them flat on your thighs.

H: Y'know, you know what a vice is right?

X: a vice?

H: Yeah, yeah clamping...

X: yeah, yeah

H: Ok, y'know, you know how the, the principle of them

X: at first, at first I was thinking like gluttony? Or gambling?

H: Yeah, those are vices as well, ok, but a mechanical tool to, to squeeze things.

X: mm-hmm

H: What I want you to do, I want you to put your hands together and... I want you to point your fingers straight out in the air



X: straight forward?

H: Straight forward. Point these two fingers in the air.

X: separate?

H: No, keep your palms together; point your fingers out; keep your elbows in place; point your fingers at me. Now in your mind I want you to imagine there's a void, a vice on the outside of your fingers and as I squeeze that vice together your fingers are going to be fine but they're gonna be squeezed tighter and tighter...

X: sorry, is the vice clamping them down or clamping them together?

H: No, they're on the outside of your fingers squeezing in... (4 sec.) And I'm going to tighten that vice up. Do you know what that vice would look like? Is it a wooden vice or a steel one?

X: ...Steel

H: I'm gonna turn the handles of that steel vice, and those fingers... are going to get squeezed... and squeezed... they're locking down, tighter and tighter... they're locking, it's squeezing; that vice is very powerful... locking tighter – that's right, you can try to resist it; go ahead, tighter, tighter... twisting, tighter, locking, watch it locking down, watch it squeezing in, there they go, that's right, nice resistance, as you resist that I want you to start counting backwards from a hundred to zero by two

X: by two

H: by two

X: quietly or out loud?

H: Inside, just to yourself. And there they go again. Locking, and very soon the vice will have them squeezed and locked tight. Continue to count, that's right, there they go, oh yeah... I love it when people are resistant. Counting backwards they're locking, tighter, the vice squeezes and squeezes, locking, tighter, and that's right, they're just about touching, squeezing and holding the count, they're locking tighter

X: !! *laughter* !!

H: = tighter, and // =

X: !! *laughter* !!

H: tighter, tight, tight, tight. The vice squeezes tighter, tighter, tighter // =

X: !! *laughter* !!

H: tighter, tighter, locking tighter, close your eyes.

H: As soon as I touch the fingers they will relax and reopen. Now. Relax your hands on your thighs, palms down, take a slow deep breath in. Let your body find its own natural state of relaxation... that's right... allow your mind to integrate that experience...

X: !! *laughter* !!

H: Slow deep breath. That's right, it's sort of funny what happens. And as your body finds its own state of relaxation, I'm gonna teach you how to relax your physical body, so that its more mentally and physically relaxed than it has been, ....and it'll find it's own state, of deeper, deep relaxation for this moment in time. And every time you adjust your body, it's just the sense that your body wants to find a new place to relax, a new ease of relaxation, and as long as you continue to breathe a nice slow long deep breath... with every exhalation your physical body just wants to relax even more... as long as you concentrate and as long as you breathe your body and mind will relax even further still... and in a moment you'll be in a physical deeply relaxed place, a place that'll prepare you for a place... unknown to you, or maybe known to you before, that you weren't aware of, a deeper mental place of relaxation, a deeper emotional place of relaxation, and again an even deeper place of physical relaxation that we call hypnosis.

I want you to listen to the sound of my voice... and I want you to follow the sound of my voice to different parts of your body. And as you follow my voice to that part of your body, bring all your focus and all of your awareness on that part of your body, and that part of your body will relax even deeper still. The more you focus, the more comfortably relaxed you'll feel.

-----[ **Deep relaxation** ]-----

(38:35) ---

And I want you to bring now all your sense, of feeling, all your sense of imagination around your forehead. I want you to actually imagine looking at your forehead, high up on your forehead from the inside rather than the outside, and I want you to imagine that every little muscle, every little nerve, and even the bone cells, what it would be like if they could just relax... and allow them to relax now. And I want you to imagine now Tom, as that relaxation spreads across your forehead... drifts down around your temples. Follow it down around your temples, noticing one side compared to the other, which one feels more relaxed, and just knowing that the other side will feel as completely and deeply relaxed. Allow that relaxation now to spread down around your jaw, right out to your chin... Allow your chin to fully and completely relax. Allowing the face muscles to relax. And as you continue to breathe... you continue to relax.

And that relaxation now, spreading around your chin... allow it to drift up and over your bottom lip, so that the bottom lip feels very relaxed. Spreading out to the corners of your mouth... comfortable sense of relaxation around your face is starting to take place... And as you swallow the muscles in your throat are actually trying to find that state of relaxation. Allow that relaxation to spread over your upper lip, right underneath your nose, comfortably relaxed... now over the bridge of your nose – that's right... [*patient shifting around*] all the way up in between your eyebrows, that deep sense of relaxation... feeling safe and comfortable; comfortable and safe, focussing on the sound of my voice.... Allow that relaxation to spread over your eyebrows Tom. You're doing much better right now. I see your body relaxing. Notice which eyebrow feels most relaxed, whether it's your left or the right, or you may feel they are equally relaxed and that's ok. That's right...

And as the eyebrows are relaxed, imagine that there's a tiny drop of water on each one of your eyelids, and the eyelids are the (one of the) smallest muscle groups of your body and therefore the most easily relaxed. And as the eyes relax, imagine that a little drop of water washing over your eyelids, right out onto your eyelashes, and as it gets ready to drop off of your eyelashes, it'll drop down and another physical site, a state of relaxation... just allow that... drop of water... just allow it and want it to drop off right now; it'll drift down, allowing yourself to drift down into a deeper state of relaxation in your face and around your forehead... do that now.

-----[ **CUT** ]-----

(43:48) ---

I want you to imagine the back of your neck, right down to your tailbone. Starting at the top of your neck, I want you to imagine that each muscle, each bone in the spine of your neck could just relax – that's right – and you'll notice that it relaxes from the top of your neck, over each vertebrae, all the way down to the base of your neck ... and allow that relaxation to spread around the sides of your neck. And as that relaxation washes down, from the base of your neck down to your mid back, you'll feel yourself wanting to drift down more comfortably relaxed physically... Follow it down over each bone, over each little bump on the spine. Allow it to drift out around your ribs, all the way out to the sides of your body. Wanting to relax; allow it to relax.



Stay in touch with that area of your body and just feel it relax. Allow that relaxation now Tom to drift all the way down to your low back, drifting down over each little bone of the spine, over each vertebra, all the way down to your low back, and that will improve your low back. Just allow that relaxation now to spread around to your side. Feel that deep sense of peace. Allow that peace to spread through your back, your neck, your upper back, and your low back. Now on a final journey down the spine, right down to your tailbone... imagine that sense of relaxation washing down over your.. low back. Spreading down over the bones of the pelvis, and all the way down to your tailbone...

You've probably never even thought about your tailbone in that way. But imagine what it would look like, if you could see right on the very tip of the tailbone. Imagine what it would be like if you could see.. your view of relaxation just hanging off the tip of the tailbone, ready to drop off... Focus on that little bit of relaxation... and imagine that that relaxation could split into two 'cause it's going to travel down over the buttocks – let it go now, down over the buttocks. Let that relaxation drift down over the backs of your legs. Walk it down the backs of your legs; talk it down the back of your legs... imagine it drifting down the back of your legs, right to the hollow of your knees. Feeling comfortably relaxed now. As it crosses over the back of your knees, drifts down your calves.. relaxation pouring right down to your ankles... around the heel of your foot... it flows up the bottom of your foot and out through each and every toe. Imagine that energy flowing out through your toes, is carrying with it relaxation from the top of your head. Flowing right out through your toes now...

Tom I'm going to get you to bring all of your awareness around your throat muscles... That's right – and as you swallow the throat muscles relax. And allow that relaxation to flow down from your throat, out over the sides of your neck, going down over each shoulder, down deep into your chest. You're doing very well now Tom, and I want you to imagine, imagine your lungs, from the inside, relaxing... Imagine your heart... if you could actually just feel and hold your heart, and actually just feel it, calm down, and feel it be at peace. Every little blood vessel in and around the heart {*and chest*} wants just to relax {*unclear*} And as it's relaxing you're probably feeling sort of heavy comfortable sense around your chest... that's a sense that your body is now deeply relaxing... allow it to relax even deeper, follow that relaxation down into your stomach area. That heavy, warm, comfortable feeling drifting down into the stomach, so that each of the muscles in the stomach, each and every organ, the solid organs like your liver and spleen just relaxing, intestines relaxing, those hollow organs of the stomach just relaxing. Every little part of your stomach now, every nerve, every blood vessel just enjoying that heavy comfortable sense...

-----[ end of extract ]-----

*45 more minutes on Tape I.*

*Bathroom break while changing tapes.*

*Approximately 45 minutes of hypnosis on Tape II, followed by discussion with therapist.*

## Appendix E: UK Firewalk transcript

(selected extracts from video)

Description: Edited amateur video of a firewalking seminar with Scott Bell held somewhere in southern England, UK. (Most likely a charity fundraiser). Received from Scott Bell by mail on Oct. 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006, along with a copy of the power-point slides used in this seminar. Although there are brief clips of building the fire at the beginning and participants walking on it at the end, this video primarily shows the facilitator conducting the workshop at the front of a classroom with approximately 20 adult participants seated at small desks. It includes an example of the arrow-breaking exercise, and the redefinition of F.E.A.R. as *False Evidence Appearing Real*. The speaker in this transcript is Scott Bell unless otherwise noted.

(1:51) ---

The secret to firewalking – there’s a huge secret and nobody ever tells you about it – the secret to firewalking is that you can either walk on fire, or you can’t. That’s what it basically boils down to. You have the self-belief when you step up to that fire, pretty confident and I feel good, I’ve seen twenty people go across in front of me, I can do it if they can do it, I’m willing, and off you go.

If you get there and you think, “still don’t believe I can do it, I’m going to get burned to a cinder, what the hell am I doing here?” Step away from the fire. There is no secret at the end of the day, it’s down to your self-belief. If you believe you can do it, you do it. Any questions on firewalking techniques? Are you all ready to go walk on fire? Yes?

-----[ CUT ]-----

(2:28) ---

Participant: {*Do you ever*} go ‘ooh, ah, ah, ahh...’ when you’ve walked across, or um...?

Scott: Absolutely I have. If you want to scream and shout and scream “this is bloody hot what we’re doing here!” go for it. Lot of people, and I think the question you want is, what happens if I get halfway through and I feel like oh my god, it’s burning. Step to the side, get off there. If you think it’s hot, get off of there, but uh... because {*your feet*} there, are there to protect you. If there’s pain there, there’s a pain for a reason. Chances are you won’t feel anything like that at all, but if you do, step off to the side.

Now there’s one thing we can’t stop happening when you firewalk, people get black feet. When you finish firewalking, you will all have black feet. Now there is some buckets out in the park there, so stick your feet in the bucket, wipe ‘em off on the grass and they should be reasonably dry by the time we get back in here. The buckets are there also for another reason. If you get halfway across and you jumped off because you think it’s feeling bloody hot... if you have a coal or something stuck into your toe, even if you get rid of that coal it can still burn the skin for probably ten or fifteen minutes. So if you put it in the cold water, extinguish it completely, you will have nothing there to show.

-----[ CUT ]-----

(3:37) ---

There’s different types of burns. The most common one is what we call a hot-spot: when you walk across you think, “there’s a little nip there, but it didn’t feel too bad, it’s fine.” You look at your feet, and you think there’s nothing there, no blisters or anything, and it feels warm probably throughout the night, and when you get up in the morning and you look at your feet there’s nothing there, it’s just a hot spot. It’s just somewhere that feels a



little bit warm on the night. Next there comes a blister, you've probably had blisters if you put new shoes on. You can get blisters from new shoes just like you can from firewalking. But they tend to be {unclear} because you might get a little bit of coal stuck in there, so make sure when you get off, just give those feet a good rub and you should be fine. Going on from there, you could have 2<sup>nd</sup> degree burns, 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns – but we don't allow those {in the UK}, we won't have any of that. And you'll be glad to know that, from my firewalks, we've never had anyone with worse than a blister – apart from me, who got a few blisters doing the world-record, but that's {unclear} breaking world-records. Ok, that's your firewalking techniques, on to the secrets.

-----[ F.E.A.R. ]-----

Ok... the secret, what we've said about, what stops us from walking in the first place? It's fear. Because a lot of people have said they were going to come along tonight, but they've dropped out with one excuse {of a thousand other reasons we know} but it all boils down to fear at the end of the day. They're scared to do it. But scared doesn't {have to cause} a problem. You have fear for a reason normally, it's there to protect us. Because we can have phobias, we can be scared of heights, we can be scared of... snakes, spiders... scared of the dark, scared of small places, but what we need to understand about fear... is it's normally pretty illogical. 'Cause look, a lot of people are scared of snakes but have never even seen a snake, touched a snake, or even been close to a snake, but they're petrified of them. So what is fear?

F.E.A.R is False Evidence Appearing Real. As I said for the snake, for whatever reason we've got that innate fear in us, but it's false because we've never touched one. We tend to think that snakes are slimy, they're not, they're really smooth and dry. But the false evidence appears real to us so it's a genuine fear. It's genuine to be scared of it. Now what we need to do, is see this false bit, we need to get rid of it, 'cause a lot of things are false. So we need to understand what the false is. This is how magicians work, yeah? Magicians work on the false evidence, 'cause they make things disappear, but they don't tell you it's up their sleeve or hidden in their pocket or something like that, so they're working on false evidence. So what I'm going to now show you, is something of F.E.A.R. False Evidence Appearing Real.

-----[ Arrow breaking discussion & demo ]-----

I've got a picture there of Diane, and she's got an arrow in her throat there. There's two pictures I've got, one's straight, but this is the one where it's just about to snap. But it's pretty illogical to think, when your windpipe's {up against} a pointed arrow. You just wouldn't do it, would you? It's nonsensical. I'm pretty logical, I've seen arrows go into things and kill things. I've got a genuine fear there. That's my windpipe. I don't like anything on my windpipe 'cause I like to breathe through there. I'm going to show you how to snap an arrow, and how it is false evidence, because after that you'll know anyone can put an arrow on their throat and snap it if they want. There's an arrow. Would anyone like to have a look at it, just to see that it's a proper arrow? There's no cuts or bends in it, it's got a reasonably sharp metal end on it.

Participant: It's an arrow.

Scott: Proper archery arrow. Put the end on the bow and fire. Everyone happy with that? Proper arrow. Ok, so what I'm going to do, I'm going to place it on my throat there, I'm going to put the pointy bit on it. I'm going to lean against here because it's pretty hard and solid on there, and snap it, I'm just walking into it; no tricks, no nothing, just your self-belief that putting it on there will not kill me.

-----[ end of extract ]-----

## Appendix F: Various consent forms

### Declaration of Informed Consent:

#### *Conway Centre Staff*

Tom Ristimaki is a PhD candidate in the School of Linguistics & English Language at the University of Wales, Bangor. His research deals with aspects of communication, interaction, and education, including group dynamics, and he would like permission to observe your work at the *Conway Centre*,<sup>133</sup> and with the permission of group members (or their parents) make audio/video recordings of various activities.

***Participation in this project is strictly voluntary.*** The data will be used for educational and academic purposes only, and any names or identifiable characteristics will be altered or omitted in order to reasonably ensure the confidentiality of the participants and any affiliated organisations. Staff: please note, although you will not be personally identified in transcripts of the data or future publications/presentations, the *Conway Centre* will be gratefully acknowledged for its (i.e. *your*) cooperation and valuable contribution to this research.

If possible, *one unedited copy* of the video footage will be given to the group as a souvenir to use as they see fit; however, only if everyone involved is comfortable with this arrangement.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please ask before signing this form. For more information, you are welcome to email Tom directly ([ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk)), or contact his academic supervisor, Professor Jenny Thomas, at the following email address: [jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk).

***Signing this form indicates your informed consent.*** This form refers to academic observation, audio/video-recording, and the use of that data for research and educational purposes; ideally, participation in this project will not change the nature of your group's scheduled activities in any way. Please fill in the required information below, sign your name, and check the appropriate box to indicate your preferred level of participation:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Permission to explicitly acknowledge the *Conway Centre* in connection with this research:

Name & Position:	Signature:

Additional Notes:

<sup>133</sup> *Canolfan Conway Centre* ~ ([www.conwaycentre.co.uk](http://www.conwaycentre.co.uk)), Llanfairpwll, Anglesey, UK – LL61 6DJ





**Declaration of Informed Consent:**  
*for Parents or Guardians*

Tom Ristimaki is a PhD candidate in the School of Linguistics & English Language at the University of Wales, Bangor. His research deals with aspects of communication, interaction, and education, including group dynamics, and he would like permission to observe and audio/video-record your child's group during various activities at the *Conway Centre*.<sup>134</sup>

***Participation in this project is strictly voluntary.*** The data will only be used for educational and academic purposes, and any names or identifiable characteristics will be altered or omitted in order to reasonably ensure the confidentiality of the participants and any affiliated organisations.

If possible, *one unedited copy* of the video footage will be given to the group as a souvenir to use as they see fit; however, only if everyone involved is comfortable with this arrangement.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please ask before signing this form. For more information, you are welcome to email Tom directly ([ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk)), or contact his academic supervisor, Professor Jenny Thomas, at the following email address: [jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk).

***Signing this form indicates your informed consent.*** This form refers to academic observation, audio/video-recording, and the use of that data for research and educational purposes; your child will remain anonymous, and participation in this project will not change the nature of the group's scheduled activities in any way. Please fill in the required information below, sign your name, and check the appropriate box to indicate your preferred level of participation:

- ✓ *Yes – You may record my child as part of this research project.*
- ✓ *Ok – You may record my child's group, but under certain conditions (below).*
- ✓ *No – I refuse to participate; you may not record my child or my child's group.*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of School: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name:	Signature of Parent or Guardian	Yes	Ok	No

Exceptions or Additional Comments:

<sup>134</sup> *Canolfan Conway Centre* ~ ([www.conwaycentre.co.uk](http://www.conwaycentre.co.uk)), Llanfairpwll, Anglesey, UK – LL61 6DJ



**Declaration of Informed Consent:**

*Adult groups*

Tom Ristimaki is a PhD candidate in the School of Linguistics & English Language at the University of Wales, Bangor. His research deals with aspects of communication, interaction, and education, including group dynamics, and he would like permission to observe and audio/video-record your group during various activities at the *Conway Centre*.<sup>135</sup>

***Participation in this project is strictly voluntary.*** The data will only be used for educational and academic purposes, and any names or identifiable characteristics will be altered or omitted in order to reasonably ensure the confidentiality of the participants and any affiliated organisations.

If possible, *one unedited copy* of the video footage will be given to the group as a souvenir to use as they see fit; however, only if everyone involved is comfortable with this arrangement.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please ask before signing this form. For more information, you are welcome to email Tom directly ([ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk)), or contact his academic supervisor, Professor Jenny Thomas, at the following email address: [jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk).

***Signing this form indicates your informed consent.*** This form refers to academic observation, audio/video-recording, and the use of that data for research and educational purposes; you will remain anonymous, and participation in this project will not change the nature of your group's scheduled activities in any way. Please fill in the required information below, sign your name, and check the appropriate box to indicate your preferred level of participation:

- ✓ *Yes – I fully agree to participate in this project.*
- ✓ *Ok – You may record my group, but I want to be excluded from your research data.*
- ✓ *No – I refuse to participate; you may not record me or my group.*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name:	Signature:	Yes	Ok	No

<sup>135</sup> *Canolfan Conway Centre* ~ ([www.conwaycentre.co.uk](http://www.conwaycentre.co.uk)), Llanfairpwll, Anglesey, UK – LL61 6DJ

**Declaration of Informed Consent:**  
*for use of previously recorded video*

Tom Ristimaki is a PhD candidate in the department of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His research deals with aspects of communication, interaction, and education, including group dynamics, and he would like permission to use your film/video footage as research data.

***Participation in this project is strictly voluntary.*** The video itself will only be used for educational and academic purposes, and any names or identifiable characteristics will be altered or omitted in order to reasonably ensure the confidentiality of the participants and any affiliated organisations.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please ask before signing this form. For more information, you are welcome to email Tom directly ([ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:ristimaki@bangor.ac.uk)), or contact his academic supervisor, Professor Jenny Thomas (University of Wales, Bangor) at the following address: [jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:jenny.thomas@bangor.ac.uk).

***Signing this form indicates your informed consent.*** This form refers to (relatively) unedited or raw film/video footage, and the use of that data for research and educational purposes; although you or your organization will retain copyright of the original footage (if applicable), this form will grant Tom permission to use video clips and transcripts from that footage in academic presentations, journal articles, etc.

Your cooperation is sincerely appreciated; you may choose to remain anonymous, or have your participation in this project explicitly acknowledged. Please check the appropriate box, have one person sign on behalf of the film-makers, and fill in the appropriate information below.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of School, Group, or Organization:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you wish to be acknowledged in connection with this project? *(please circle one)*  
YES      NO

Name/Title of Representative:	Signature:

*Please return to:*

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