

The Concept and Experience of Boundaries

Julian Zanelli

Boundaries are the things that let me know my limits. Boundaries can occur "inside me" or they can occur between me and someone else. We have lots of boundaries, however most are unconscious. In fact we have different boundaries for almost everyone we deal with, we have different boundaries for each topic of conversation we enter into. We have boundaries about how far we will go in terms of certain emotions as well. Boundaries are one of the solid ways we have of identifying ourselves psychologically. We often know who we are by how far we will go, our limits so to speak. It is in this way we can say that this "space" is mine, and that is yours. Boundaries are the phenomenon behind the experience of telling someone to "back off" or "Keep out".

We can never properly understand boundaries without a quick introduction to the idea of "space". So here it is, in a nutshell. Space is a gap of nothing. But is a very different kind of nothing. This space is "experientable". That is, the space that I am talking about here is something that you can experience, and that people want more of, or less of, or they love it, or fear it. Space also happens in the mind/body and between people as well. Space is always bounded. Have you ever said, "I want more space" to someone? Another way of saying that is "I have a boundary and I want you on the other side of it." the boundary could be in time, or in physical distance. it doesn't matter, it is such a common idea that everyone knows what is meant.

The experience of space that I mentioned earlier is referred to as spaciousness. When it happens inside a body/mind, it is usually pleasurable, peaceful, and desirable. When it happens between people, spaciousness is usually felt to be expansive, open, allowing etc, and most people really like this. Although it must be said that for some people who are unfamiliar with it, it is a little scary at first. What many people constantly forget is that boundaries need to be constantly adjusted and updated in order to keep experiencing spaciousness. There is a creative tension between keeping solid boundaries in place and enjoying oneself and another in spaciousness.

Before I get onto "Boundaries" proper, I want to show the intrinsic relationship between ground and boundaries. Because there is a very important function in the way these two central ideas help each other. 'Groundedness' helps us to stay clear-headed and relaxed and calm enough to reflect on the way something affects us. We are able to notice the impact of a thing, we are able to track the bodily sensation, and we can notice, when we are really relaxed, how we interpret this impact. The bodily response and interpretation is very subtle, quick and until we focus on it, unconscious. The 'aha' moment that we are all familiar with, with usually involves some form of recognition. In order for someone to notice all that, they would need to be relaxed,



grounded and focused etc. Their attention would be encompassing the other person *and* themselves. So it is groundedness that allows us (state dependant processing) to accurately interpret what we are feeling and then bring this into relationship. So, all this internal information is the stuff necessary to create boundaries. Without that information from the inside, how could someone know if they should allow someone into their lives any further? How should they know if the conversation/event is intrusive or invasive?

So in order for boundaries to function as boundaries we need to have sufficient information. And the information comes as a result of settling down and finding your own ground. The word boundary indicates that it is a border between one space and another! Between the internal and the external, between self and other. So “self”, “internal” and “my space”, must be claimed, they cannot be empty – otherwise who will create the boundary?

If you are not there, if you are not grounded, and you are in your head (conceptualizing your sense of self), then you will not be able to take appropriate action, at the appropriate time. Someone needs to be on the farm to defend it! Someone needs to be home to let someone else in! If you want to go out to meet the world, what are you going to come out from? What’s your base, your reference? There needs to be a boundary so that we can lovingly surrender it or vigorously defend it.

Recognizing ourselves as bounded individuals is an important step after grounding. Now we are starting to know how we are and who we are. The contrast created by noticing differences, as well as boundaries that delineate self and other, help to clarify who we are. We all know that we have a body, and that we have a name and that this is us! We all know that we have tastes, tendencies, proclivities, likes and dislikes - and that these are ways that we can identify ourselves. However we also have a mind, and when that mind is in relationship to another it can be difficult to really work out whose thought is whose. Do you know anyone who has been in an intimate relationship and said that they can’t work out where one person starts and another stops! This kind of experience is highlighting the lack of boundaries, and there is always a lack of clarity in thinking, and poor choices are made as a result.

So what does all this have to do with therapy? A lot! Therapy is a relationship like all others, even though it has a specific purpose, professional guidelines, an ethical framework etc, it is still about two people sitting in a room together relating. All the usual issues of human relatedness arise. So boundaries become very important.

I am always encouraging those with soft boundaries to separate, differentiate, discriminate, and experiment with being really different (from me and my thoughts) whilst remaining related (in contact, engaged and available). Those whose boundaries are over utilized so that they won’t let themselves hear what I am saying have a different path - learning to see that they have created “barriers to change” instead of simple boundaries. What’s the difference? Simply speaking, we can say that a boundary is something that you have choice over, you can choose when to let them



down, and when and where to erect them, they are flexible. However, you have no, or relatively little choice with barriers, as they are inflexible. Barriers initially are used when we have lost too much ground, when our boundaries were either non-existent, or too weak, and when we were too light on the ground and they have been compromised in some manner. The barrier acts a rigid line of defense, and accidentally acts to constrict the barrier maker as well. The barrier is erected unconsciously and cannot be changed until it is brought into consciousness.

Therapy helps a person create fine tuned boundaries, so that they can perceive when they need more contact, less contact, what qualities of contact are needed!

