# Out of the Comfort Zone

A preliminary analysis of the psychological dynamics of letting go and still being safe – examples from climbing with cdb adults

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**Screenshots from video taken from:**
Gibson, J. (2005). Climbing to communicate: An investigation into the experiences of congenitally deafblind adults who have participated in outdoor education. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Strathclyde (available at http://www.sensescotland.org.uk/services/outdoor-thesis/index.php)
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# Abstract

**One of the often-argued benefits of using outdoor and adventurous activities is that they can move participants out of their comfort zone whereby learning potential may be enhanced.**

Microanalysis of video footage from a congenitally deafblind man's first ever rock climb seemed to suggest changes in comfort level for both the congenitally deafblind adult and his partner. This presentation will introduce the preliminary analysis of the psychological dynamics between a congenitally deafblind adult and their partner from this footage where the psychological "comfort" of each participant is assessed using comfort zone theory from the field of outdoor education.

Some of the comfort zone theory will be presented, in particular the concepts of a secure base, comfort zone, perceived danger and actual danger will be discussed and the significance of moving in and out of different zones of comfort for both the congenitally deafblind participant and partner will be addressed with particular relation to how this might be useful for developing learning and relationships and also creating potential communication development opportunities.

A main focus point of the analyses will be to examine how the partner shifts between being a secure base for and controlling the activity of the deafblind person in relation to his own perception of danger. The hope is that this will give us some insight in how the perceived comfort/danger of the partner influences the relation and thereby the perceived and actual freedom and safety of the deafblind person.

The relevance of this type of analysis to other activities for the congenitally deafblind and as a way of staff development will be highlighted along with models being developed to aid in the presentation of the analysis.

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# Presentation notes

### Introduction (Joe)

The idea for this presentation came about during a course at the (then) NUD at Dronninglund which was focused on outdoor activities with cdb people that Flemming was running and I was presenting at. During this presentation we will first briefly outline some of the outdoor theory, then look at some video footage that inspired our initial discussion and begin to show how we have applied the theory to the footage. (I will be happy to talk more about the outdoor theory to anyone who is interested!) What we are presenting is very much still in its development and we ask whether people feel it is appropriate and useable. We hope that feedback from this workshop and further thinking will improve our understanding in this area and build on our thinking. It is interesting to note that the field of cognitive semiotics and outdoor education can be brought together by deafblindness.

### Outdoor Education Theories (Joe)

We have looked at two aspects of outdoor education theory that may be of use in working with people who are congenitally deafblind. Before introducing the two concepts it is important to note that the term "outdoor education" is predominantly British in origin and denotes using the outdoor environment and activities for educational or therapeutic ends, (actually I could talk all day about what it could mean but I will restrain myself today…) I am also aware that there are different cultures of using the outdoors, especially from the Scandinavian countries, but again, that is not the focus of our talk today. It is also worth noting that like working with cdb people, the theory behind the formalised use of the outdoors is a relatively (in academic terms) young field and therefore some of the theories are still being developed and have often been adapted from other areas.

The first of the concepts that we will be discussing is the notion of perceived and actual risk (Barnes, 1997). Perceived risk is how the risk involved in an activity is felt by the person doing the activity, whilst actual risk is the risk that is present in reality. Activities such as climbing with all the safety equipment (ropes, helmet, and harnesses) have a high level of perceived risk. Hill walking has a low perceived risk, but the actual risk is often much higher. This is something that outdoor practitioners often use, contriving situations where the participants' perception of danger is greater than the reality.

The second and perhaps more controversial concept we want to discuss is "comfort zone". The concept of "comfort zone" is one that has been long recognised, if not fully understood, by the field of outdoor education (Brown, 2008). For the purposes of this presentation, we have begun to combine these theories and come up with a continuum with five levels.
- a secure base
- comfort zone
- perceived danger (sometimes called "stretch" in the outdoor literature)
- actual danger

This continuum is from the perspective of both participant and partner…

### Models of security relations – relation to comfort zone and how they can be used for analysis (Flemming)

Some definitions:

Experienced security *is a belief in one's own ability to predict and cope with the emotional impact of a given relation to the environment. This is the opposite of* fear*.*

Actual safety *is assured by the ability to apply the appropriate actions to a given situation in order to prevent physical damage. This is the opposite of* danger*.*

Basis: Gibson (1979), understanding the environment is to know what possible patterns of interaction you can apply. (Not a direct quote!)

Security is to keep emotional uneasiness within a limit that will prevent distress.

Two ways of doing this socially. We do both all the time with our kids, or if we are responsible for others – in other words, when we are the one who should be the more competent partner in a relationship.
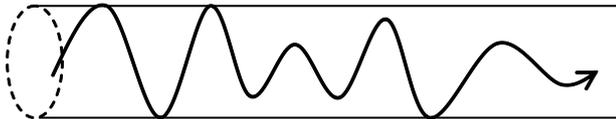


Socially provided security, model one: *Structuring/scaffolding/guiding/prompting* (there are many words for this!).
This means actively intervening in the action patterns of the other in order to keep him within the limits of security. Within the boundaries of the safe.
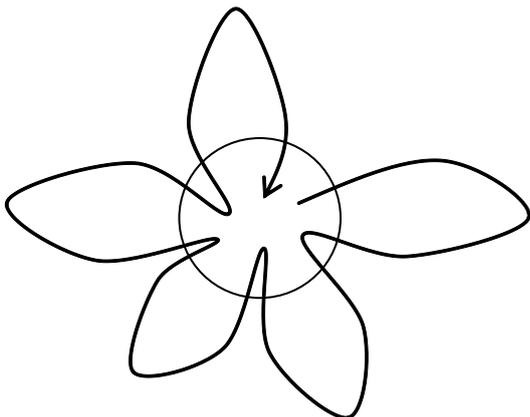


Socially provided security, model two: *Being available as a secure base*. (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1999:23).
This means to let the other out on his own, and letting him decide for himself when it is time to seek refuge in you as a secure base. This is also where you share the experience, and negotiate the danger level, or other parts of the meaning construction, socially.

**Video (Joe)**
We will now look at the piece of video that initially inspired the discussion between us. The video was taken originally as a holiday video and was then used as data for my PhD (Gibson, J. 2005). The video shows a profoundly congenitally deafblind man participating in his first rock climb. Prior to this climb, we had climbed and scrambled over a variety of grassy banks and rocky ground. We had also explored the climbing harness and helmet using it to climb up a ladder. (This was particularly significant due to the man's history of being restrained and made to wear a padded helmet in the past.) We will watch the video through then go through it again highlighting some of the significant moments as we see them.

Before we begin to look at the analysis we need to look at the language of the models we are using.

## The grammar of security relations (Flemming)

### 1. Components

C       More competent partner (MCP) (security/structure "provider")

o       Less competent partner (LCP) (security/structure "consumer")
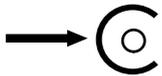
(Roles may be reversed!)

→       Action direction of more competent partner

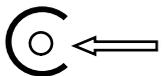⇒       Action direction of less competent partner

### 2. Some fundamental behavioural patterns

→(Cо)       MCP moves in to add security and structure. Notation: →Co

←C o       MCP moves away and sets LCP free. Notation: ←C o

(Cо)⇐       LCP seek security and/or structure. Notation: Co←
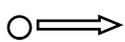
C o⇒       LCP moves away from the structure and safety of MCP's embrace. Notation: C o→

When we first began to analyse the footage, we first saw three main sections. Further analyses confirmed this initial analysis, but added some richness and subtlety.

## PT's first climb security analysis (joint)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 0:30 | Joe puts PT's hand onto rock | →Co |
| 0:39 | PT feels helmet and Joe puts PT's other hand onto rock | →Co |
| 0:46 | PT feels helmet and Joe puts PT's hand back on rock | →Co |
| 1:03 | Joe puts PT's hand onto rock | →Co |
| 1:08 | Joe puts PT's hand onto rock | →Co |
| 1:12 | PT feels helmet | |
| 1:14 | Joe puts PT's hand onto rock | →Co |
| | | |
| 1:19 | PT starts to move up independently (space between us grows) | C o→ |
| 1:33 | PT feels helmet | |
| 1:36 | Joe helps PT with foot placement while PT feels helmet | →Co |
| 1:41 | Joe puts PT's hand onto rock | →Co |
| 1:42 | PT moves up away from me | C o→ |
| 1:47 | PT feels helmet | |
| 1:48 | Joe puts PT's hand onto rock | →Co |
| 1:58 | PT moves up away from me | C o→ |
| 2:00 | Joe move up causing the rope to go across PT's face | ←C o |
| | | |
| 2:02 | PT bites hand    -trust | |
| 2:03 | Joe takes PT's hand | →Co |
| 2:04 | PT searches with left hand  (exploring from within secure base) | Co(→) |
| 2:07 | PT moves up with me still holding hand | Co(→) |
| 2:10 | Joe places PT's hand on rock | →Co |
| 2:11 | PT reaches for Joe's arm and pushes back | Co← |
| 2:14 | Joe grabs PT's jumper and shifts weight forward | →Co |
| 2:16 | PT takes Joe's arm again | Co← |
| 2:19 | PT grabs Joe | Co← |
| 2:46 | Joe turn PT back to rock | →Co |
| 2:48 | cuts to finish of climb | |
| 2:50 | PT keeping contact and Joe moves him forward | →Co |

We can now watch the video again with the codes showing as they occur...

## What is the point of all this? (Joe)

So what does this tell us about our interactions with the deafblind people we work with, whether on a rock face or not?

If the aim is for our partners to be independent enough to be an equal participant during activities, we initially may need to provide structure that creates trust in the strategies (of self and other).

In the video the structure given in the first phase is good as it gives opportunity for the more independent second phase. This may be because we build up trust and confidence in each others, and our own, strategies and ability.
1. Joe realizes that PT is capable
2. PT trusts the strategies of Joe

So, when trying to develop a trust in themselves, our partners need to first trust us

1. Our strategies must be good (safe) and trustworthy (secure)
2. They must realise/know/understand/believe this
3. We enable them to develop their own strategies
4. We must trust their strategies, but scaffold (be available) when necessary, and at this stage we have to be most attentive

## Safety, Security, trust and strategies (Flemming)

One's own experience of the actual safety is one factor in the experienced security. This has to do with an experience of familiarity with the situation and experience with coping with the type of situation at hand. In short: If you _trust in your own action strategies_, you feel secure, which means that you believe that you are actually safe.

Another factor is the _trust in the action strategies of the other_ persons you are with. This includes the technical equipment, the level of the task given by others, and the actions the other persons can apply in order to secure your safety. This trust in the action strategies of the other is another pathway to believing that you are actually safe, and thus feeling secure.

These two factors interact dynamically, as they support each other and likewise may affect each other negatively. What they regulate is the emotional scale from fear to experienced security.

The Schema below might provide a little help for analysing our trust in the strategies of ourselves and the other.

In this schema we may also insert the different social strategies from the developmental profile (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1999), and from scaffolding: Taking refuge in the strategies of the other as a secure base, boldly going out on your own, letting the other out on his own, and taking control over/adding structure to/supporting the strategies of the other (strategies are in _italic_ in the schema).

| Safety/security Analysis | Trusting your own strategies | Testing your own strategies | Distrusting your own strategies |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Trusting the strategies of others** | Feeling secure | Feeling bold<br>C  o→<br>*Going out on your own* | Feeling unsecure.<br>Co←<br>*Taking refuge with the other as secure base.* |
| **Testing the strategies of others** | Feeling bold<br>←C  o<br>*Letting the other be bold* | Feeling bold<br>←C/o  C/o→<br>*Taking risk, and letting the other take risk* | (Self-contradictory: bold+unsecure. Will not occur unless mental illness is present) |
| **Distrusting the strategies of others** | Feeling unsecure because of the actions of the other.<br>→Co<br>*Applying structure to make the other and/or yourself safe.* | Feeling bold<br><br>*Taking risk, also on behalf of the other (Being reckless?)*<br>(Will probably not occur in db work) | Feeling unsecure and afraid.<br><br>*Applying excessive structure in an attempt to gain control (which will bring you back to trusting your own strategies)* |

## References

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