

# Jumping The Berlin Wall

Social And Cultural Atom Repair With An Individual Adult

**Craig Whisker**

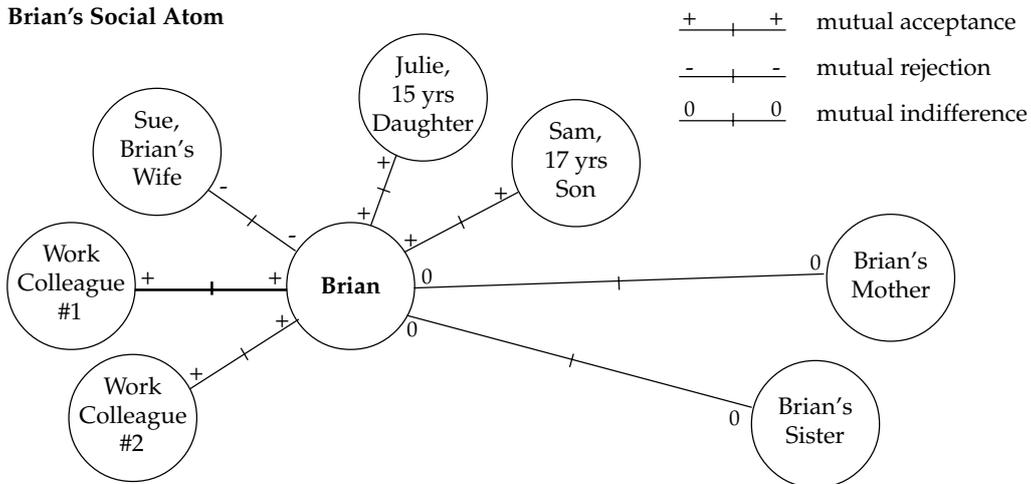
*Craig is a family psychotherapist in private practice and an advanced psychodrama trainee who lives on the Kapiti Coast, NZ. This article is an abridged version of a Social and Cultural Atom paper he submitted to the Wellington Psychodrama Training Institute in 2005.*

This article presents my work with 'Brian', a client seeking to develop adequate functioning in familial relationships. The work is informed by Bowen's family systems theory (Bowen 1978) and role theory from psychodrama (Clayton 1993). A detailed account of my first session with Brian is followed by abbreviated accounts of the second and third sessions. In the reflections and role analyses which follow each session emerging progressive roles and role conflicts in Brian's functioning are examined. This leads to the development of recommendations for further work.

## Session One

Brian is a 44 year old professional man referred by his GP following the prescription of anti-depressants for about one year. At the beginning of our first session he sits comfortably and talks confidently about his life. He has been married to Sue for 19 years and they have two children, Sam aged 17 and Julie aged 15. From his descriptions of personal and professional life a picture of his current social atom emerges.

**Brian's Social Atom**



### Social Atom Analysis

Brian's social atom comprises close and mutually accepting relationships with his children, and distant though mutually accepting relationships with two work colleagues. His relationship with Sue is mutually rejecting and relatively distant. Other familial connections with his mother and sister are very distant and mutually indifferent.

Brian appears to be isolated from other adults both within and outside his family. If he has come to rely on strong links with his children for social and emotional affirmation, the strength of these links may lessen in the near future as they move into adulthood. Seeking counselling now may be a sign of progressive functioning to redress isolation and avert crisis.

### Session One Continued

Three weeks ago Brian told Sue he wanted to end their marriage. It is the first time he has voiced this, however, he has thought about it for many years. He has recently had the vision of himself as an essentially happy person trapped in a depressing marriage. He wants to be able to look back at the end of his life knowing he broke the 'old cycle' with Sue and tried something new, for better or worse.

Brian hopes Sue will embrace his plan as an opportunity for her own personal growth. This is in keeping with the 'old cycle'. Instead, she is shocked and devastated. She quickly warms up to not surviving alone and withdraws into suicidal ideation.

Brian presents as the depressed victim of an unfulfilling marriage. His overdeveloped coping roles as *critical commentator* and *desperate fixer* of Sue fail to bring satisfactory meaning to his life. They fuel his lifeless dependence on waiting for her to change. The emerging progressive roles of *creative self-lover* and *visionary trailblazer* are evident in his actions when he discusses his vision with Sue and later seeks counselling. However, these embryonic roles are in conflict with his powerful coping role of *benevolent lifesaver*, expecting Sue's gratitude for his initiatives. Her rejection of his proposal reinforces his functioning as a *depressed victim*. These roles comprise part of Brian's cultural atom and are tabulated below.

### Preliminary Diagnosis and Clinical Plan

Brian appears to be resolving a major depressive episode which has lasted over one year. The onset follows a chronic pattern of disaffected life for many years. His current solutions, namely, to end his marriage and win his wife's approval, are in conflict. The development of new progressive roles, such as independent thinker and enlivened actor, are likely to lessen this conflict. The use of doubling, concretisation and role reversal in our session may assist Brian to resist the existing coping roles and allow embryonic progressive roles to expand.

### Session One Continued

Twenty minutes into our session Brian stops talking and a pensive look settles onto his face.

### Initial Assessment of Roles in Brian's Cultural Atom

Progressive Roles	Coping Roles	Fragmenting Roles
Visionary Trailblazer Creative Self-Lover (both embryonic)	Critical Commentator Desperate Fixer Benevolent Lifesaver	Depressed Victim

After about 10 seconds of silence the following enactment is produced.

Craig, *What is emerging in you now ?*

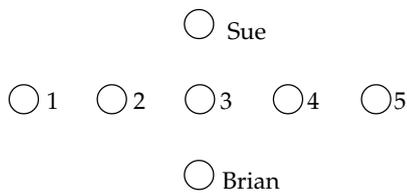
Brian, *I don't know. I feel like I'm stuck too close to Sue to get a good fix on things. The view is too hazy.*

Craig (rising to stand), *Please stand up with me. Imagine that this chair is Sue. Place it relative to yourself to illustrate this close proximity.*

(Brian places the chair one metre away from himself).

Craig, *Now place objects between Sue and yourself to represent the things that stick the two of you together in this relative proximity and which stop you from stepping back to have a less hazy view.*

Brian places objects on the floor in positions as illustrated below.



Key;   1 = financial responsibilities  
           2 = family home  
           3 = Julie (15 year old daughter)  
           4 = Sam (17 year old son)  
           5 = day-to-day domestic routines

Craig, *Take up the role of each object in turn and let us know how that object keeps you stuck too close to Sue.*

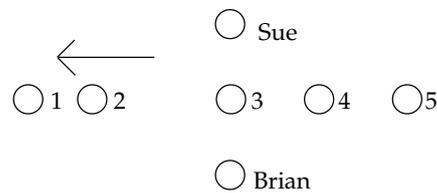
Brian as financial responsibilities (facing Brian), *I'm financial liabilities and debt. You can't ignore me because the consequences for the next 20 years are too great. Get it wrong with me and I'll be a millstone around your neck for the rest of your life.*

Craig, *Reverse roles.*

Brian as himself, *Yes, I need to treat you carefully and talk to Sue to make sure we deal with you*

*properly. The house is the same really. It is only one house and there are 4 people to be housed. It provides security for us so we need to deal with these two (financial responsibility and the family home) together and properly.*

Brian flows into action as he speaks, lifting up objects 1 & 2 and placing them together away from objects 3-5, as illustrated below.



Craig, *Take up the role of Julie. What does she say to keep you stuck in close proximity to Sue?*

Brian as Julie (facing Brian), *Don't do it !*

Craig, *Reverse roles.*

Brian as himself, *I have to.*

Craig, *Reverse roles.*

Brian as Julie, *But I don't want you to. I feel insecure and I don't like the change.*

Craig, *Reverse roles.*

Brian as himself, *I know you have physical, emotional and mental needs and I want to talk to you and give you what you need to feel secure. And I want you to understand why I need to do this.*

Craig, *Reverse roles.*

Brian as Julie, *I don't want change. I don't like change. Don't do this to me !*

Craig, *Reverse roles.*

Brian shrugs, grimaces and looks over at Craig.

Craig, *Looks like you'd like her to understand you and change her outlook to take you in, just when at 15 her developmental task is to separate from you on her terms, not yours.*

Brian, *Yeah, she doesn't want my change. In fact, she's the one most like me, most likely to let you know what she doesn't like and so seeing me change must be pretty unsettling for her.*

Craig, *How about Sam ?*

Brian as Sam, *Oh, it's alright Dad. I'm flexible and doing my own thing anyway and I can move between you and Mum OK.*

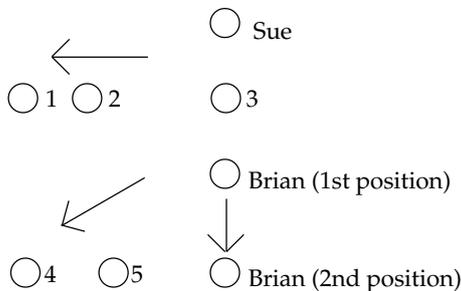
Craig, *Reverse roles.*

Brian as himself, *Yeah, he's not a problem. He doesn't really belong there. He's over here (places object 4 on a chair beside himself). And this one's the same (picking up object 5). That's flexible and can be sorted out.*

Craig, *You can come up with ways of running your home life day to day and have that reflect your desire to separate too?*

Brian, *Yeah. It's just a matter of sorting it all out. That's not a problem (referring to object 5). It can be sorted.*

Craig, *So take a step back now Brian to a position where you have created more distance between you and Sue (Brian steps back to 2nd position). What's it like having this increased distance between you and her?*



Brian (inhales deeply, eyes momentarily skyward). *I feel more myself. I'm freer to be myself (his whole body expands as he stands up fully and looks Craig in the eye). I'm happier here and I know being here is the right decision for me.*

Craig, *What do you see from here?*

Brian, *I'm not going to lose contact with Julie. I'll give her what she needs to feel secure even though she doesn't want me to go. And the finance and the house I'll sort out with Sue.*

Craig, *Now, come back to the first position. That's*

*where you've placed yourself today. Where you're stuck in close proximity (Brian moves to first position). Make a statement to Sue from here.*

Brian, *I really hope that you can see this (marriage separation) as a good thing in the long run to stop me from being unhappy all the time. I want you to get counselling so you can face the emotional stuff and let us get on with discussing how we are going to do it and what Julie needs.*

Craig (standing beside Brian facing Sue, doubling Brian's stance and demeanour), *So when you are in close here and things are hazy you get drawn back to old hopes, eh? Of Sue changing or her being something different to what she is. That's the old stuff coming up again, keeping you trapped in the 'old cycle' with her.*

Brian, *Yeah, I can't really change her. I can't change anyone. They have to want to change themselves.*

Craig, *Hmm, so you're susceptible to falling into that old way here, eh? And losing the freedom of back there (referring to Brian's 2nd position).*

Brian, *Yeah, I like it back there much more. That's where I want to be.*

### Reflections on Session One

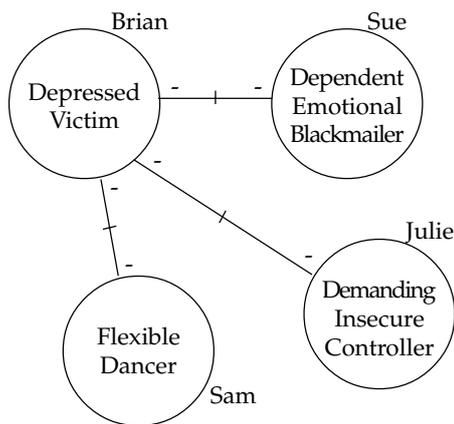
The family is nearing a major transition point in their life-cycle as the children enter young adulthood and develop independence from their parents in preparation for leaving home. Brian and Sue face the prospect of developing a new relationship with one another after nearly 20 years of child rearing. If they have retained their marriage over recent years because they are the parents of dependent children then successful completion of this stage in the family's life cycle may make marriage redundant. If this is not accepted by all concerned, as it is apparently not by Sue and Julie, then the family may become stuck in this stage and experience crisis (Hayley 1976).

### Roles and Role Relationships Represented by Brian in Session One

Evidence of family life cycle stuckness will be

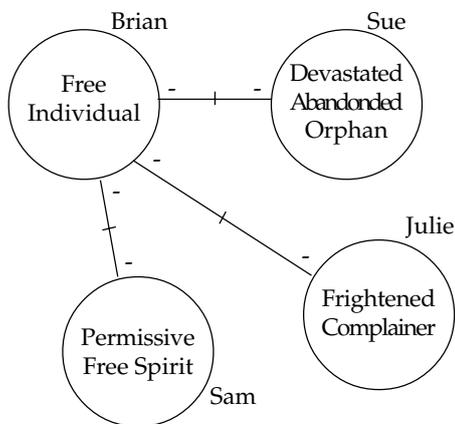
seen in the over-development of coping or fragmenting roles by family members. The main roles or role elements represented by Brian during session one are presented below.

**Role Relationships with Brian as a Depressed Victim**



When Brian feels depressed and victimised in his marriage he is rejected by every family member. Sue rejects him by requiring more from him. Julie rejects him by promoting her own needs first. Sam rejects him by not being drawn in. Evidently, Brian is now also rejecting depression by seeking therapy to develop a better life for himself.

**Role Relationships with Brian as a Free Individual**



Sue and Julie are potential coalition partners against Brian's emerging sense of freedom. Sam's support for his father creates a benevolent alliance between the men. If the females join forces to oppose either man, or if the males jointly oppose either female, the differentiation of self of those involved will lessen. Bowen (1978) referred to these scenarios as triangling. Remaining detriangulated will assist Brian's individuation.

Sam is accepting of Brian in a warm-neutral individuated way, whereas Julie is highly reactive. Whether this is simply rebellion against her parents in order to progress her own individuation is uncertain. If her parents have successfully projected onto her their undifferentiated selves she may be emotionally fused with their responses to anxiety. Bowen refers this as a family projection process (Bowen 1978) resulting in the 'favoured' child being the least differentiated one. Her inclusion in triangling when the family is under stress would be evidence of the latter.

**Implications for Future Sessions**

Brian contributes to the family's stuckness when in the over-developed roles of depressed victim and desperate fixer. Conversely, in fledgling progressive roles of free individual and creative self-lover he differentiates himself from his current family, and ultimately, from his family of origin where many of his over-developed roles will have arisen (Bowen 1978).

Bowen's directives for the enhancement of progressive roles may be useful in subsequent therapy sessions with Brian. They involve developing person to person relationships between Brian and his family members, and assisting Brian to become a better observer and controller of his own emotional reactivity so

as to remain detriangulated from emotional situations in his family. New roles, such as dispassionate thinker, unhurried guide, lover of light and space, and strong willed believer in self, will assist him in these differentiation tasks.

### Summary of Session Two

As Brian sits down for our second session he is smiling and has a lively look on his face.

Craig, *You look relaxed today.*

Brian, *Do I? That's funny, because I just got off the phone from my mother and she's given me a good tuning up just 15 minutes ago.*

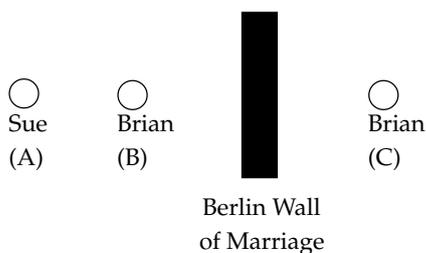
Craig, *You seem pretty pleased about that.*

Brian, *Well, when I got a chance to speak I just said, "Thanks for that Mum. Goodbye." and put the phone down.*

Brian reflects that in the face of his mother's verbal onslaught against his decision to end his marriage he would normally have tried to convince her what he was doing was correct.

Brian, *That's something I learnt from the exercise we did last time. That I can't make someone feel what I want them to feel, or think what I want them to think. I've noticed that I've been getting then losing then getting again that distance we talked about last time. I have the distance and I feel great and free. Then I lose it again and I'm trying to make Sue feel better again and wanting to avoid her pain because I really feel her pain and I don't want her to be distressed.*

Brian concretises the situation below.



He describes moving back and forth between position B, where he tries to make Sue feel better, and position C, where he feels 'free' having jumped over the Berlin Wall of Marriage. I propose the analogy of a parent leaving their preschool child at a daycare centre. Position A is the child at the daycare centre. Position B is the parent looking into the daycare centre every fifteen minutes to check up on the child. The parent is anxious and seeks reassurance from the child. This is disturbing for them both. Position C is the parent staying away from the daycare centre until the appointed time to collect their child. The child learns to be at the daycare centre without the parent. The analogy strikes a chord in Brian. He realises his occupation of position B is an attempt to control Sue's experience of the marital separation so as to reduce his own anxiety.

### Reflections and Role Analysis Following Session Two

Brian resists triangling with his mother and the effect is immediately apparent in his body and mind. There is new experience as a dispassionate thinker and strong willed believer in self. This assists Brian to avoid fusion with his family's emotional system. He is a *visionary trailblazer* differentiating himself from the norms of his family of origin.

However, fusion comes and goes in relation to Sue. Brian struggles to let Sue have her own experience of their separation and wants to write the script for her. He does this to avoid her expressions of pain and fear so as to shield himself from his own separation anxiety. Towards the end of the session he resolves to strengthen his ability to be a *creative self-lover* as a counter role to being an anxious parent.

Brian is experiencing conflict between old coping roles and emerging progressive roles, namely, *anxious parent* versus *creative self-lover*, and

**Assessment of Roles in Brian's Cultural Atom following Session Two**

Progressive Roles (Emerging)	Coping Roles			Fragmenting Roles (Diminishing)
	(Moving Towards)	(Moving Away)	(Moving Against)	
Dispassionate Thinker, Strong Willed Believer in Self, Visionary Trailblazer, Creative Self-Lover	Desperate Fixer, Benevolent Lifesaver, Anxious Parent		Critical Commentator	Depressed Victim

*desperate fixer* versus *dispassionate thinker*. Subsequent therapy sessions will seek to strengthen the emerging progressive roles.

**Summary of Session Three**

Brian begins by expressing his confusion about feeling attracted to Sue during a recent occasion when they spent time together talking about their separation. She listened empathically, took onboard his experiences and wanted to improve their marriage. He felt drawn to her new response toward him and warmed up to wanting more of this. He is aware of the individuation he has enjoyed recently, yet now experiences himself collapsing towards her in the hope she will make everything better by understanding him more, being more other-centred, and affirming him. This is the old cycle in their relationship being repeated. Brian demands change and Sue appears to agree. Brian projects his relationship expectations onto that agreement, while Sue is unaware of his many assumptions.

Following discussion between Brian and myself about his developing self-sustaining qualities and discernment the following interaction takes place.

Craig, *Think of a child with natural talents. This is like Sue having a new response towards Brian. Can the parent of the child appreciate the child's talents without imposing their own values and opinions*

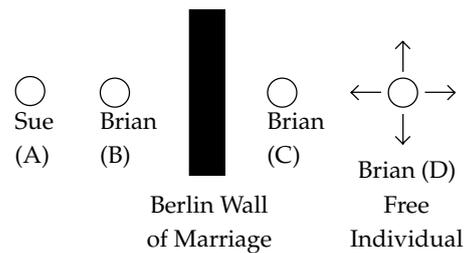
*about what is a worthy talent or pursuit and what is not? Can Brian appreciate what Sue is doing without having to impose the old marriage map on her?*

Brian, *I had that happen to me as a child. Not seen for what I was. Pressured to do what my parents thought were the right things.*

This is a significant moment for Brian. He is suddenly in the midst of cultural atom repair again and further differentiation from his family of origin.

Brian (after silence), *I feel freer now than ever before. I understand how relationships have worked in my family and I now feel more capable of sustaining myself. My world feels larger.*

Brian concretises this as follows.



Brian takes up position D and experiences the exhilaration of his expanding world. He holds his arms out wide and rotates through 360°. He feels dynamic power and peace. He is not fearful and does not retreat to familiar territory near the Berlin Wall of Marriage. Nor does he 'shoot over

**Assessment of Roles in Brian’s Cultural Atom following Session Three**

Progressive Roles (Emerging)	Coping Roles			Fragmenting Roles (Diminishing)
	(Moving Towards)	(Moving Away)	(Moving Against)	
Free Individual, Dispassionate Thinker, Visionary Trailblazer, Creative Self-Lover	Desperate Bargainer, Benevolent Lifesaver, Anxious Parent		Critical Commentator	Depressed Victim, Needy Non-Recipient

the horizon to get further away from Sue. He is whole and congruent relating to the world in every direction. Literally taking in the full breadth of life.

**Reflections and Role Analysis following Session Three**

Brian experiences significant pleasure as a free individual. This comes about through his discernment of patterns of dependency and manipulation that exist in his family of origin and which he perpetuates in his marriage. He experiences these patterns first-hand when Sue relates to him empathically, triggering his fragmenting roles related to neediness and coping roles related to bargaining. These are tabulated above.

**Recommendations for Further Work**

The emerging progressive roles form an appropriate foundation for further work to increase Brian’s differentiation of self. At this stage there has not been an expansion and diversification of Brian’s restricted social atom. His current expressions of spontaneous creativity in the world are likely to see this situation change and supporting him in this endeavour would likely bear fruit.

Brian’s cultural atom repair work has seen the growth of discerning, self-believing and creative

roles in his personality. Further refinement of these roles may be achieved through the enactment of key relationships in Brian’s life, including psychodramatic role reversal. These in-session role tests serve as rehearsals for the role testing Brian will face in his day to day life with critical family members and others.

The inclusion of Sue in future sessions would give them both the opportunity to develop control over their emotional reactivity towards one another. With adequate coaching and development in this area they will both be better equipped to function more effectively in the present.

**Concluding Remarks**

In these first three therapy sessions Brian develops new progressive functioning by increasing his differentiation of self. This is an emerging quality in his life. Further work was undertaken in both individual and couple sessions with Brian and Sue over several months following the work described in this article. During that period the couple separated and successfully shared the parenting of their teenage children. In my final individual session with Brian he was happy with himself and described feelings of ‘newness’ and ‘movement’ in his life.

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