

# THE MISS MARPLE MODEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The Agatha Christie detective, Miss Jane Marple, is used as a model for a particular method of doing psychological assessment. The paper demonstrates how this seemingly loose, intuitive, and informal approach is supported by a formal conceptual system. The underlying structure is delineated using concepts and tools from Descriptive Psychology. The model is articulated in terms of its procedural and conceptual features, as well as personal characteristics of the person using it.

My husband and I are not television watchers, but one snowy night a couple of years ago, we were stuck at home and turned on the BBC Mystery Series. Thereupon we discovered Miss Marple, Agatha Christie's octogenarian, amateur sleuth, who just happens to show up at the right places and solve murder mysteries. Although we enjoyed all the BBC mysteries, Miss Marple was different. In her cases, I figured

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**Advances in Descriptive Psychology, Volume 6, pages 159-183.**

**Editors: Mary Kathleen Roberts and Raymond M. Bergner.**

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**ISBN: 0-9625661-1-X.**

out the mysteries. I knew what was going on. I couldn't believe it, because when it was a Sherlock Holmes mystery, I wouldn't get it.

The other experience I had with Miss Marple was a strong sense of identification with her. I felt a little foolish about it, but none the less I thought, "I work just like Miss Marple, which is why she makes sense to me!" I had been worrying about not being able to articulate the way I do psychotherapy. It had come up during a session with a client who was a psychotherapist herself. At the end of her second or third session she had confessed, "You know, I pay as much attention to how you work as I do to the results. I have been trying to figure out what it is you actually do. But I can't. We talk about this and that, and then suddenly out of nowhere you make a remark that goes straight to the heart of the matter, and my perspective shifts dramatically. Unfortunately, I can't figure out how you got there." Well, neither could I—even after twenty-five years of experience. So here is Miss Marple, sitting in her parlor saying this and that, seeming to change the topic three or four times, and suddenly there it is, right to the point. When I saw this, I said to myself, "See, she does it too. It works." I felt affirmed. Even though she is a fictional character, obviously she was created by a real person, and she is believable.

I became intrigued with the challenge of understanding her way of operating, and how to elucidate it using Descriptive Psychology. I wanted to show what it is she does, although she does it spontaneously and automatically, and how other people can learn to do the same thing—although not everybody, because it does take some talent and some experience in life, some richness in human experience.

Then I really got into it, because I figured that there was enough here that I could use it in training and supervision. So I'm warning you right now, there's a whole lot in here, and a lot more could be said. As I go through her way of talking and her way of operating, I'm also going to draw some parallels to psychological assessment. We'll look at these tricks of the detective trade and the psychological assessment trade, the kind of assessment you do when you're about to begin psychotherapy, as opposed to a formal assessment for other purposes.

We start with the paradigms for crime and psychological disturbance. In both cases, some kind of violence has been done to somebody, and somebody's pain—not necessarily that person's own—is bringing him or her in to ask for help. That's where you start in both cases. The detective confronts two problems: who committed the crime, and what shall be done about it when the culprit is known. How are you going to prove it, and are you going to turn the culprit in to the police, or what else might you do? And the psychologist confronts two related problems: what has gone wrong, and what shall be done about it when

that is known. So they're both confronting a pathological state that involves the individual and the larger community, whether it's a criminal or a personal situation.

As I see it, a detective's function is to understand what's going on, and then to bring out the best in people to resolve the situation for the better. (A mystery aficionado has admonished me that it's the *best* detectives, such as Miss Marple, who do this.) The significance of solving the mystery is to liberate people from the bondage of that pathological state. In Descriptive Psychological terms, we talk about "freeing up their behavior potential", that is, increasing the type and range of behaviors that they're capable of. In Eastern spiritual terms, we call it "untying their karmic knots".

Both Miss Marple and the psychologist set out to achieve a social and personal state of affairs that is just and also, if possible, compassionate. So I'm going to go through what Miss Marple does to answer the question, "Who committed the crime?", and I'm dividing it into *procedural*—how she goes about gathering information, *conceptual*—what she does with the information, how she makes sense of it, and *personal*—who she is, her person characteristics, which includes natural talent plus those qualities that can be acquired or learned as a skill.

## PROCEDURAL

We're going to start with the procedural. First you have to get acquainted with Miss Marple. Let us begin with *A Murder Is Announced* in which Miss Marple has just come into a tearoom. There she happens upon one of the people who lives in the household where a murder was recently committed, and who was a witness of the murder. This is Miss Marple's big chance to sit down with her and gather some information.

What follows appears to be casual social chit-chat, in the course of which Miss Marple learns about everybody in the household and some of the neighbors as well. As the woman she is talking to becomes engrossed in her recollections, she begins to remember information that turns out to be crucial for solving the mystery.

So one of the things that Miss Marple does is *simply engage people in ordinary conversation*. It's a natural way of joining persons' worlds and disarming them. Both in interviewing witnesses and in psychotherapy, initially one is in an awkward situation. What do you *say*? How do you *start*? You start the way you start any conversation: you use a conversational format throughout; you use plain English; and you avoid unusual or technical language that would confuse people or make them

uncomfortable. Thus you learn what you need to know without the person's even being aware of telling you.

Another example of her procedures comes from *A Caribbean Mystery*. Miss Marple has been thrown off track in an investigation, but just keeps talking to the doctor who is involved, while she regroups:

Internally, however, Miss Marple was far from being either cheerful or philosophical. She wanted a little time in which to think things out, but she was also determined to use her present opportunities to the fullest effect. [That's another benefit you get from this kind of hanging out and chatting.]

She engaged Dr. Graham in conversation with an eagerness which she did not attempt to conceal. That kindly man, putting down her flow of talk to the natural loneliness of an old lady, exerted himself to divert her mind from the loss of the snapshot by conversing easily and pleasantly about life in St. Honoré, and the various interesting places perhaps Miss Marple might like to visit. He hardly knew himself how the conversation drifted back to Major Palgrave's decease (*A Caribbean Mystery*, p. 37).<sup>1</sup>

Good conversationalists find their way as they go along. A structured format isn't needed. Good conversation is a key to Miss Marple's work and to the therapist's. In another passage, she meditates on the power of conversation:

Miss Marple lay thinking soberly and constructively of murder, and what, if her suspicions were correct, she could do about it. It wasn't going to be easy. She had one weapon and one weapon only—and that was conversation.

Old ladies were given to a good deal of rambling conversation. People were bored by this, but certainly did not suspect them of ulterior motives. It would not be a case of asking direct questions. (Indeed she would have found it difficult to know what questions to ask!) It would be a question of finding out a little more about certain people (*Ibid*, pp. 40-41).

You start small and you build from there. An informal conversational style also allows you to slip past people's "defenses", as we say in the trade. That is, *at least* you don't trigger their reasons *not* to tell important information. You create a comfortable context in which a relationship can be built, and then you can discover and act on their reasons *for* telling. Descriptive Psychology uses ordinary conversation in psychotherapy as well as in its conceptual structure, so you don't have two different languages going on either in your head or as you're talking to the person.

Another thing we see in Miss Marple is an *innocuous self-presentation*. One of her lines that I love is, "A policeman asking questions is suspicious, but an old lady asking questions is just an old lady asking questions." (*A Murder Is Announced*, BBC production). She is also self-

effacing. She and others call her “a harmless old tabby”. And she’s a master at low-power moves.

Characteristically, high-power moves involve initiating, directing, controlling, and terminating, as contrasted with the low-power moves of carrying out, elaborating, supporting, or maintaining. As we all know, things can change drastically in the course of carrying something out, or through the support given or not given to the people who are in the high-power position. There’s a great deal of power to be exerted when one operates in the low-power way. In their acculturation as women, even women like myself who are inclined to use high-power moves typically learn low-power moves as well. And Miss Marple uses them very effectively, particularly in dealing with the authorities. She’s just an amateur, working with policemen and supervisors and detectives in a male world, and coming from a low-power position, she doesn’t violate their expectations and thereby elicit direct opposition.

So, for example, one of the things I do is, when I talk to people on the phone, I introduce myself as “Dr. *Carolyn Zeiger*” I always put the “Carolyn” in there, and the moment a client walks in, I drop the “Dr.” and just start chatting with them. This kind of move reduces the distance, and the difference between any kind of hierarchical statuses, and the difference in our worlds. And quite honestly, in terms of hierarchical status, women tend not to be taken as seriously as men anyway, so if you’re a woman, make use of the fact! This way, it’s easier for people to forget that I’m a doctor: I’m just a pleasant, friendly woman, and even being middle-aged, let alone aged, helps.

Again, in psychotherapy it’s important to use the low-power position at the beginning with a client, by just being there in an unintrusive, reactive sort of way. When you’re dealing with the authorities (people who for one reason or another have more authority or prestige than you do), you just move to the low-power position, and when you need to take direct action, wait for your chance to move into the high-power position.

Miss Marple is a *keen and constant observer*, and not only in the particular situation but of life in general. These observations add up over the years, constituting a library to draw from. She’s a keen observer of life, taking in everything that’s going on around her. In any assessment, this broad scope of observation is essential.

In Descriptive Psychology, we often use the paradigm of the Actor-Observer-Critic: the Actor performs spontaneously; the Observer notices and describes what is going on; the Critic appraises the Actor and Observer both positively and negatively. During an initial interview, you spend a lot of time being the Observer, simply noticing and describing what the Actor (client) says and does. And you want to be careful not

to move into the Critic role too soon, making appraisals before you've gathered enough information, either in your own head where you begin to shut off information that turns out to be crucial, or in the way that you treat people. If you move in too quickly, before someone feels really heard and understood, that person will feel discounted and cut off, and treated as somebody other than who they are. If you go off the track at this point, you will generate resistance.

Here we also note, in Descriptive Psychology terms, the sixth of the Maxims for Behavior Description: "A person acquires facts about the world primarily by observation, and secondarily by thought" (Shideler, 1988, p. 42). So observation is very important.

Another thing Miss Marple does is to *step into and join the person's world, and form a relationship with that person*. She does this very beautifully when, in the BBC production of *A Murder Is Announced*, she says to Miss Bunner, "I understand *everything* about lonely old ladies".

Murder and psychotherapy are emotionally charged situations, and people want to talk. They want to be in relationship to others. So you want to act on Maxim 3: "If a person has reason to do something, he will do it unless he has a stronger reason not to" (Shideler, 1988, p. 40). You're being very careful to avoid giving anybody stronger reasons not to talk about what they naturally want to talk about.

In addition, people want to talk in a situation where they are, or at least perceive themselves to be, safe. There's a little passage where Miss Marple is talking with a spinster and her elderly brother, and the woman starts:

"The story I heard," began Miss Prescott, lowering her voice and looking carefully around.

Miss Marple drew her chair a little closer. [Normally the brother is always there watching and disapproving of their gossiping. So this is Miss Marple's chance.] . . .

"It seems," said Miss Prescott, "but of course I don't want to talk any scandal and I really know nothing about it—"

"Oh, I quite understand," said Miss Marple.

"It seems there was some scandal when his first wife was still alive! Apparently this woman, Lucky— such a name!—who I think was a cousin of his first wife, came out here and joined them and I think did some work with him on flowers or butterflies or whatever it was. And people talked a lot because they got on so well together—if you know what I mean."

"People do notice things so much, don't they?" said Miss Marple (*A Caribbean Mystery*, p. 60)

It just goes on and on like that, as Miss Marple deftly pulls Miss Prescott in as she gets more and more comfortable. Here is somebody with whom really she is quite safe. In another place, they do it all non-

verbally around the disapproving brother by giving each other little looks that say, "We'll talk about this later".

Miss Marple also uses appropriate self-revelation to encourage the other person to do the same. She starts right in by saying, "Oh, my rheumatics!", which immediately says "You're free to talk about something very personal". She's not revealing anything that in psychotherapy would be considered inappropriate, but it's a way to make the contact that says you can feel free to talk about things that possibly are painful as well as personal.

Basically you're making moves that activate more rather than less of their reasons to talk to you, and to talk about what counts in that situation. Here another of the Maxims for Behavior Description is relevant: "If a person has two or more reasons for doing X, he has a stronger reason for doing X than if he only had one reason" (Shideler, 1988, pp. 40-41). So the more reasons you give them to talk, the more likely they're going to be forthcoming. As a part of this strategy, Miss Marple will bring in different themes from different directions as she teases out their reasons to tell all.

So Miss Marple *listens attentively, understands, and demonstrates her understanding and appreciation of the person's position or situation*. To do this effectively is a matter of getting in the habit of listening. You observe and you listen. And you can be either totally immersed or simply taking it in while you're doing something else. It can be as passive as simply listening out of politeness to somebody who isn't very interesting, but you're still taking in what he is saying. This is an aspect of the general quality of observing and listening in life. The important thing is to be *open* to what you are hearing.

Listening well involves knowing when to be Actor, when Observer, and when Critic. When do you simply "be and do spontaneously"? When do you sit back and "notice and describe"? And when do you begin to "make appraisals" about what it is that you're seeing or hearing or doing?

*Total-immersion listening* is what I call the Actor-type listening, and there's an old axiom in therapy that if you're bored during a session, something is wrong, because naturally you're absorbed in the exchange that's taking place. I consider psychotherapy a meditative state where nothing else distracts or disrupts the process or your experience of it. It's very spontaneous and unself-conscious.

There's also a kind of passive absorption, and I call this *Observer-type listening*, where you're registering what's happening, but that's about all. You're just taking note of it and describing what's going on. Often in a session, for example, you're really interacting with one person but there's somebody else in there—I think of a marital session I was doing

with a couple whose little boy was tearing around the office in the background. I ignored the child and kept my focus on the couple, who also ignored him. However, my peripheral awareness of his increasingly outrageous behavior, combined with the father's concomitant escalating demands on his wife, suddenly gave me a new insight into the conflict between the husband and wife. Just about then the boy began to really tear up the office, and I had to intervene.

It can be even more passive than this. You can be strolling down the street, as Miss Marple was in *A Pocket Full of Rye* when she heard children singing the nursery rhyme "A pocket full of rye". She was not even thinking about the mystery or the rhyme at all, but still she was taking this in, and later on, something clicked within her mind, and the nursery rhyme suddenly became the source of the image she used to understand what was behind a series of murders.

So *you use listening to gather information*. You also use it to form *a relationship* with the person. In forming a relationship, you demonstrate that you have listened carefully by acting in some way on what you have heard, thus showing what you're learned. This can be verbal or non-verbal, as in the little exchange where the two ladies looked at each other so as to say, "We'll take this up later", or "You and I understand that, even if other people don't".

People constantly tell Miss Marple that she's a good listener and very understanding. In one place, her informant, Miss Bunner, says, "Oh, you're so comfortable", and then at the end, she says, "She's *such* a good listener and *so* understanding". Her informants also tell her a great deal more than they mean to. I thought about this one for a long time: how does this come about? I have concluded that the key here is that she's genuinely and intrinsically interested in what people have to say. She's described as a gossipy old lady, but in fact, she cares about all these people very much. She's genuinely interested in them—who they are and why they do what they do. She's following what we call, in my spiritual tradition, her "dharma", that course in life that's right for *her*: unravelling murders, increasing people's behavior potential, liberating people from their karma. There's an integrity to that which is appealing to people. It's the recognition, "This is a real person sitting in front of me".

Miss Marple is coming from, acting upon, her highest level of significance, that which is really meaningful to her. She's doing what she loves to do and has the ability to do well. Watching the Olympics—you don't even have to know anything about the sport—have you ever felt the thrill of seeing people being wholly themselves? The genuineness of being who you are attracts people; it encourages them to talk to you.



She also *elicits people's reasons for cooperating, and she acts on those reasons*. This can be either a very gentle, subtle move, or it can be a forthright, strong-arm, move. The clues to their reasons for talking, for cooperating, may appear in their posture, their self-presentation, and what they don't say as well as what they do say. So you have to be able to read people. You also have to be able to draw people out in a way that doesn't look calculating.

To take an example from *Nemesis*: It is imperative that Miss Marple find out where a package has been sent, but the only person who can give her that information is the postmistress. Taking on the guise of a flustered, absent-minded old lady, Miss Marple inveigles the postmistress into telling her to whom it was addressed. Her approach here resembles an Erickson confusion-technique. It's also somewhat like strategic therapy: setting up paradoxical situations and so forth.

But she will actually go further than that. She had been brought up with a proper respect for truth, and by nature was truthful. Even so, in certain circumstances she would tell extremely plausible lies, such as saying that she already knows who has committed the crime—sometimes an effective way of setting bait.

Here we need to take into account the controversy about using strategic therapeutic moves, because we have to remember the importance of being guided by higher principles, and of paying attention to what it is we are doing. Whether we're doing psychotherapy or solving a murder mystery, we have to be clear on what we are doing. Otherwise the use of strategic moves is simply nosy or manipulative or even evil in its intent, or—whether we intended it or not—evil in its effects. We have to be guided by clear vision, principle, respect, and love and compassion. Even then, we can still go wrong and must take responsibility for that possibility. Such moves are a calculated risk.

One of the things I love about Miss Marple is her tremendous respect and compassion for the murderers themselves. After a murderer kills her own best friend because she has talked too much, she honestly grieves for her loss, and Miss Marple—knowing her to be the murderer—sits with her as she grieves. Nevertheless, Miss Marple goes on to prove her guilt and have her arrested.

In listening to discover people's reasons for cooperating, what to look for is their pain, their pride, their need to be right, their fear, their desire to change either themselves or other people, their devotion to the truth, their need for comfort, their desire to share their triumph or their joy. It's not easy to read people or ascertain their motives for doing what they do, and this is where sensitivity and practice and experience enter in. It's also a place where the images we use in

Descriptive Psychology are very helpful (Ossorio, 1976, *passim*), and I'll talk a bit more about them as we go on.

Further, you *don't have to be there and see everything with your own eyes*. You can gather information from other people's reports, even though they may not be directly involved or involved at all, because you don't have to have a great deal of information, or first-hand information. You just have to have *enough* to do what you need to do. In several mysteries, Miss Marple hadn't met most of the people involved, or wasn't present at the event, and one of the best examples of this is *Nemesis*. It's a marvelous story. There she is hired by somebody after he died—his letter is sent to her posthumously. One of the main figures had died ten years earlier, another one is in prison, and Miss Marple doesn't even know what she is supposed to be doing. Her employer merely sets her off by saying, "Let justice be done", and with only that for guidance, she has to figure out where to start and where she's going and all the rest of it, including what crime had been committed.

As psychotherapists, most of the time we aren't at the scene of the "crimes", although a lot of them are committed in my office, particularly by couples. They bring it right out for you to see. But in individual therapy, not only are they not bringing it out for you to see, they're trying to look better than they behave other places.

A final point on procedure is to *know your limits*. You have to know who you are and who you aren't, what you can do and what you can't do, and when to quit. At one point, after Miss Marple has taken on this man's request that she go out and do justice for him, and she's having difficulties, she settles herself into bed and speaks to his spirit.

"I've done the best I could," she said.

She spoke aloud with the air of addressing one who might easily be in the room. It is true that he might be anywhere, but even then there might be some telepathic or telephonic communication, and if so, she was going to speak definitely and to the point.

"I've done all I could. The best according to my limitations, and I must now leave it up to you."

With that she settled herself more comfortably, stretched out a hand, switched off the electric light, and went to sleep (*Nemesis*, p. 50).

And on another occasion when she was stymied:

Miss Marple undressed, got into bed, read a few verses of Thomas à Kempis which she kept by her bed, then she turned out the light. In the darkness she sent up a prayer. One couldn't do everything oneself. One had to have help (*A Caribbean Mystery*, p. 159).

This reminder is here for the particular benefit of graduate students. The peace of mind that comes in acknowledging that we don't have total control or responsibility, and in asking for help from both earthly and other-earthly powers, is essential to maintaining our equilibrium—and to not screwing things up.

## CONCEPTUAL

On the conceptual side, what we have Miss Marple doing is *individual case formulation* (Ossorio, 1986). She's gathering facts and seeing how they fit together, what patterns there are in people's person characteristics and their behavior, and how all these come together to help her answer four basic questions that in fact we ask all the time as we do psychological evaluation:

- What sort of person would do X?
- What reasons would the person have for doing X?
- What relationship to a person, event, or object would this be an expression of?
- With whom, or what, might the person have such a relationship?

We answer those, and we've gone a long way toward understanding who this person is and what's going on. In Descriptive Psychology, often we set up these questions in the form of behavior explanation formulas:

Psychodiagnostic formula: In *these* circumstances, it would take *that* kind of person to engage in *this* behavior. Circumstances and behavior are given; from these we draw conclusions about person characteristics.

Literary formula: In *these* circumstances, *this* kind of person would behave in *that* way. Circumstances and person characteristics are given, and from these we draw conclusions about behavior.

Situational formula: *This* kind of person would not behave in *this* way unless the circumstances were of *that* kind. Person characteristics and behavior are given; from these we draw conclusions about the circumstances (Shideler, 1988, pp. 91-92).

In each one are two givens; you are left to figure out the third. You see how handy it is to have that all spelled out so that you can really think it through.

Miss Marple is using *an observational model, not an inferential model*. Her way of operating or thinking about things is not making tight logical inferences to make accurate predictions: e.g., if A then B, then C must be true. I think of Sherlock Holmes that way—he's always pointing out, "It's obvious: if A then B then C". This kind of logic is

valuable, and Miss Marple uses it upon occasion, but it is not the key to her success.

Her focus is on making sense out of people's behavior, what people do and why they're doing it. She follows Peter Ossorio's frequent observation that the world makes sense and so do people. It's not a matter of shrugging your shoulders and saying, "People sure are strange" and "Life is mysterious". Instead, you're often finding yourself saying, "People are indeed strange, but they *are* comprehensible". The logic involved is the logic of human behavior, and Descriptive Psychology provides a logical system for making sense out of it.

To indicate more directly a little of what we have in Descriptive Psychology, it is "a set of systematically related distinctions designed to provide formal access to all the facts and possible facts about persons and behavior—and therefore about everything else"(Shideler, 1988). The phrase "provides formal access" is the key, because even though what I'm talking about is a very informal way of doing things (or so it appears), formal access makes available to us a tremendous amount of information.

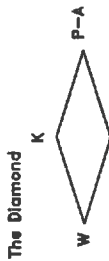
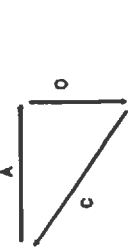
Fundamental to Descriptive Psychology is the Person Concept, and this chart suggests how much is involved in it, and how comprehensive and complex and systematically interrelated it is. You can see from this how you can take any one of these pieces, like the Actor-Observer-Critic or the Significance Diamond or the Judgement Diagram or the Perspectives, and simply by understanding that piece, you will understand a lot more. You don't have to have this whole diagram in your head. You don't even ever have to have seen it in order to be able to use any of these pieces competently.

In this approach, the *Observational Model*, you find a difference in the way things are put. It isn't "If this occurs, then that must follow". Instead, our statements take the form of "It's likely that —" or "Don't be surprised if —" or "People are inclined to —".

*Observations are not simply imprinted tabula rasa fashion. They are always understood and remembered within a conceptual framework, and one of our most useful tools is the notion of the Standard Normal Person.*

The Standard Normal Person is the one who in every situation does just what the situation calls for, no more and no less, because he conforms merely to what could be expected in those circumstances. Compared with others in that culture, he is neither stingy nor profligate, aggressive nor submissive, diligent nor lazy, stupid nor brilliant. He does not do too much or too little of anything, or otherwise depart from the norms of that socio-cultural frame of reference. . . . Actual people are characterized by how far and in what direction they deviate from the standard normal person: "she is brave" means that she is more than ordinarily courageous; "He is old for his years", more mature than others of his age (Shideler, 1988, p. 217).

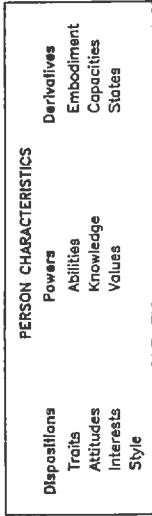
Actor, Observer/Describer,  
Critic/Appraiser Feedback Loop



KH

Transition Rules  
Basic Descriptive Units

ARTICULATION OF THE PERSON CONCEPT

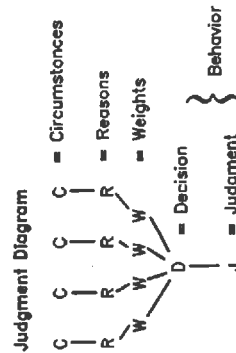
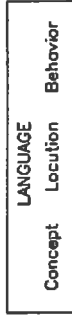


Behavior = Intentional Action = <I, W, K, KH, P, A, PC, S>  
 [Identity, Want, Know, Know-how, Performance, Achievement, Person Characteristics, Significance]  
 [ parameter = Identification, PC parameter = characterization]

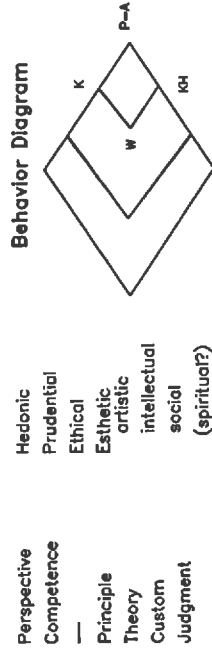


Relationship  
Formula

Status Dynamics  
Self Concept  
Behavior Potential



Justification Ladder Perspectives Significance (Symbolic)



With this norm before us, we can see the exceptions, the variations and details that make each person a real person yet still an instance of a particular pattern.

The novelist Charles Morgan gives us an example of this use which makes it very clear that in referring to the Standard Normal Person we are not talking about an Ideal Person:

People were to him like the angles marked on his school protractor, some leaning to one side of the upright and some to the other. The upright was no better than the rest because it happened to be in the centre, but it was of use as a basis of measurement (Morgan, 1936, p. 21).

Miss Marple carefully notes those deviations and from there further notes deviations that fall into recognizable patterns. For example, in discussing a case with a police officer, she argues that the behavior pattern of a petty thief is not compatible with the behavior pattern of a calculating murderer. Patterns in human behavior reveal persons' reasons for doing what they do, which is to say, their motives.

*Fundamental to doing case formulation using the observational model is pattern recognition.* Once when Miss Marple is figuring out who she is and who she isn't, she says:

I mean, I know what people are like because they remind me of certain other people I have known [in the villages where I have lived]. So I know something about their faults and some of their virtues. I know what kind of people they are (*Nemesis*, p. 49).

This is her trademark, pattern recognition, and I find I do the same thing, particularly in supervising other therapists. I just sit there listening for a while, and asking questions, and suddenly I say, "Oh, that reminds me of this client I had a few years ago", and I talk about that until I begin to see the pattern. And of course you do that with clients also, although most of the time you're doing it in your head. You're remembering that this is like so-and-so, and this is what it's like, and so forth.

The patterns you use don't necessarily come from real life. They can come from literature or poetry or movies or music—they just have to fit. In *Nemesis*, Miss Marple likens Clotilde, who killed her adopted daughter, to Clytemnestra, who killed her husband. People learn a great deal by reading. I think of a man who has led a very isolated life, spending little time with other people, but he reads extensively and watches movies, and has a repertoire of understanding about people that's astonishing given his history.

Looking for patterns, here are some places to look.

1. *In other people:* (a) You look for their *Person Characteristics*. A person with these kinds of characteristics is likely or not likely to do these kinds of things. Miss Marple says, "A petty thief isn't likely to suddenly move on to armed robbery and murder." A lonely spinster with no other close relationships will probably not gladly allow her beloved, adopted daughter to marry.

(b) You look at it in their *behavior over time*. People have habits and strong inclinations that are revealed by their behavior over time, and show you how they're apt to behave in the future. A person who has had four to six drinks a day for 20 years isn't likely to just quit without some imperative reason. A woman who has never argued with her husband isn't likely to start suddenly, and one who always has will keep on doing it. Remember the behavior formulas.

2. *In yourself.* Miss Marple knows, for example, that routinely she writes checks for seven pounds but not for seventeen. Consequently she quickly spots a forged check. So you look for patterns also in yourself. It's invaluable to know your own characteristic ways of reacting to people. When you notice that you're angry or sad or apprehensive around someone, you begin to ask yourself questions: "When have I felt like this before? What does it remind me of? What sort of person makes me feel like this?" When Miss Marple is explaining to the officials how she solved a mystery, one of them asks her what she felt in encountering a particular situation, and she replies:

"It was feeling. It wasn't really, you know, logical deduction. It was based on a kind of emotional reaction or susceptibility to—well, I can only call it atmosphere."

"Yes," said Wanstead, "there is atmosphere— atmosphere in houses, atmosphere in places, in the garden, in the forest . . ."

"The three sisters. That is what I thought and felt and said to myself when I went in to The Old Manor House. I was so kindly received by Lavinia Glynne. There's something about the phrase—the three sisters—that springs up in your mind as sinister. It combines with the three sisters in Russian literature, the three witches on Macbeth's heath. It seemed to me there was an atmosphere there of sorrow, of deep-felt unhappiness, also an atmosphere of fear and a kind of struggling different atmosphere which I can only describe as an atmosphere of normality" (*Nemesis*, p. 25).

She was looking at her reactions to being in this house and around these people, and what was going on there, and relating all this to literary characters and events.

(3) You also look for patterns *in the relevant circumstances*, because circumstances connect to patterns, and circumstances tell you what patterns to look for. I think, for example, of stepmothers—a common pattern. If someone's a stepmother (the circumstances), you immediately know that she's outside the usual family system of spouse and

children and is powerless in many ways. What's more, she feels it. At the same time, everybody in the family is charging her with bringing the family together, being the mother, making it happen. She has no power but is asked to play a powerful role. So you can be expecting her to be feeling a lot of frustration and pain.

In Descriptive Psychology, we have a prescription for recognizing patterns, and we call it "Drop the details and look for the pattern" (Ossorio, 1986). This isn't always easy, and there's no particular technique that I know for doing it. More than anything else, you need practice and experience, and there's also some ability involved. There are people who can do this quite readily. (An excellent series of examples is contained in Roberts, 1990). Think also of the Myers-Briggs personality assessment: people who score high on the Sensing function look at the details, while those who prefer the Intuitive function see the patterns and the big picture, and grasp it immediately. Miss Marple is adept at pattern recognition.

Once you recognize the pattern that the facts fit, you gain an understanding of the situation, and a lot more about possible facts. Once Miss Marple recognizes that this petty thief is like Freddy Tyler of the loud ties, she begins to see other possible things that could be true about him. So a case might remind me of a client I saw a few years ago. However, the next step is to drop the details and see what the essential structure is, and then discern which facts actually fit and which don't. Just remember, you are using "drop the details" to do individual case formulation, not just working a pattern—which is one of the ways you can go wrong.

Fortunately, you don't have to be eighty years old, and grow up in an English village where you've been watching everything all your life, to be able to recognize and see patterns. In Descriptive Psychology, we've developed quite a repertoire of images that perform much the same function. For example, I think of a doctor who said to me, "You know, all my life I've wanted to be a doctor, and here I am, Dr. So-and-So with a big income, and I'm miserable. I can't figure it out because this is what I wanted more than anything, to be a doctor." My response was, "It's like The Two Mayors. There's the mayor who wants to be the mayor and have the authority and the prestige and the recognition and all that, and then there's the mayor who wants to do what the mayor does: get the work done, roll your sleeves up, take the rap when things go wrong, actually run a city" (Ossorio, 1976, pp. 30-31). This doctor hated doing what doctors do. We have lots of images like this in Descriptive Psychology that give us a library of patterns to draw on.

A caution here: when you see a possible pattern, whether you're a detective or psychologist, the temptation is to start filling in the blanks



to make it fit this model. This tendency to make things up operates at a very subtle level. Assumptions start coming into play as “facts” very easily. It’s a real problem with theories. Miss Marple never does this. She is exceedingly careful in how she puts things, as when the police investigator says, “Somebody wanted to kill Miss Blacklock,” and she says, “Well, it has the appearance of that” (*A Murder Is Announced*, p. 73). And on another occasion, when he says, “So I have to look for a Mr. X,” she responds, “Or a Miss X or a Mrs. X” (*A Murder Is Announced*, BBC production).

Here the Descriptive Psychology cautionary slogan is “Don’t make anything up”, and I know that one of the things that Peter Ossorio, founder of Descriptive Psychology, learned years ago was that especially with beginning students, he has to say this louder and more often than just about anything else because it’s such a temptation. In *Nemesis*, everybody is assuming that the murderer was a man because that person was wearing men’s clothing, but when Miss Marple traces the parcel and finds that although it contains men’s clothing, it was mailed by a woman, she is confirmed in her belief that the murderer was indeed not a man.

Clinicians violate this rule constantly, as do the official detectives whom Miss Marple often gently and indirectly corrects. In particular, this is the downfall of psychological theories: cf. Freud’s dictum that if a woman wants to assert herself in the world, then it is assumed that she has “penis envy” and really wants to be a man.

When the facts don’t fit the pattern, you want to discard the pattern, look for a new one, or keep looking for more data to see if perhaps this one is going to work. But you keep checking the fit. This is where your strength comes into play if you have a strong preference for using the Sensing function on the Myers-Briggs (the opposite to Intuition). You will be careful to check that the facts actually fit the pattern. Miss Marple doesn’t just rely on her intuition. In sum, it is a matter of recognizing the pattern that fits the facts or what pattern the facts make, NOT fitting the data to the pattern.

One of the things that fascinates me about pattern recognition is that when you see the whole picture, you don’t always know what the tip-off had been. Something has just clicked into place. Margery Allingham, in *Dancers in Mourning*, puts this beautifully:

As the little piece of the jigsaw dropped into place, his mind jolted . . . his brain seemed suddenly to turn over in his head. It was a definite physical experience and was comparable to the process which takes place when an unexpected train in the underground station appears from what is apparently the wrong tunnel and the mind slips over and adjusts the phenomenon by turning the universe other side out, substituting in one kaleidoscopic second east for west (Allingham, 1937, p. 280).

Your whole view of things has now changed.

Then there's *the use of logical constraints to create boundaries for determining what's a possible explanation, and also to use them as tests for the validity of your explanations or descriptions*. Here's an example of Miss Marple's using logical constraints to set the boundaries. In explaining her solution of the *Nemesis* mystery, she says:

There were certain things that must be, must logically be, I mean, because of what Mr Rafiel had indicated. There must be somewhere a victim and somewhere a murderer. Yes, a killer was indicated because that was the only liaison between Mr Rafiel and myself. There had been a murder in the West Indies. Both he and I had been involved in it, and all he knew of me was my connection with that. So it could not be any other type of crime. And it could not, either, be a casual crime. It must be deliberate crime. It must be, and show itself definitely to be, the handiwork of someone who had accepted evil—evil instead of good. There seemed to be two victims indicated. There must be someone who had been killed and there must be clearly a victim of injustice—a victim who had been accused of a crime he or she had not committed (*Nemesis*, p. 251).

So in case formulation, you aren't just floating around out there. There are constraints for determining what possible explanations there are. Even such constraints, however, can be violated or in error because in this case things aren't as they seem. The observation may be off base, or the facts be wrong or incomplete.

Another sort of logical constraint comes from the *Maxims for Behavior Description*, which provide general maxims for testing the validity of our descriptions of persons and their behavior. As my colleague Carl Sternberg says, "Maxims are instructions for how not to go wrong in making sense of people," and another colleague writes:

We use terms like "right" and "wrong", "complete" and "incomplete", "rigorous" and "careless", "adequate" and "inadequate" for the purpose, "misleading" and "illuminating", and those maxims can guide us in making those judgements. They warn and remind us of the logical constraints on the completeness and coherence of the description. Further, we shall want to know if the description conforms to what is empirically observable (Shideler 1988, p. 69).

In addition to the general maxims, there are specific maxims for specific arenas such as solving murders. If you violate them in your investigation, you are likely to run into big trouble. Miss Marple has a number of these.

One is: "The obvious is so often right." That's a good one for therapists to remember, too, because we're very adept at coming up with a lot of complicated explanations when maybe the answer is sitting right in front of us. This reflects Maxim 1, "A person takes it that

things are as they seem unless he has reason enough not to.” (See Table 1.) Miss Marple and we are careful to see if we have any reasons not to believe the obvious, as the danger for us is the consequent tendency to assume that things are *not* as they seem.

Table 1  
Maxims for Behavior Description

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- Maxim 1: A person takes it that things are as they seem, unless he has reason to think otherwise.
- Maxim 2: If a person recognizes an opportunity to get what he wants, he has a reason to try to get it.
- Maxim 3: If a person has a reason to do something, he will do it unless he has a stronger reason not to.
- Maxim 4: If a person has two or more reasons for doing X, he has a stronger reason for doing X than if he had only one of those reasons.
- Maxim 5: If a situation calls for a person to do something he cannot do, he will do something he can do—if he does anything at all.
- Maxim 6: A person acquires facts by observation (ultimately) and by thought (secondarily).
- Maxim 7: A person acquires concepts and skills by practice and experience in one or more social practices which involve the use of the concept or the exercise of the skill.
- Maxim 8: If a person has a given personal characteristic, he acquired it in one of the ways it can be acquired, i.e., by having the relevant prior capacity and the appropriate intervening history.
- Maxim 9: Given the relevant competence, behavior goes right if it does not go wrong in one of the ways that it can go wrong.
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Another one is: “Nothing is impossible.” “Murderers are so often unlikely,” Miss Marple says. “They may be charming, likeable people.”

“Nobody is beyond suspicion,” one of my favorites, she taught to a rookie detective who was guarding the door at the scene of a crime. He says to her, “Of course, Miss Marple, you may come in. You are beyond suspicion.” And she fixes him with a stern look, stops dead in her tracks, and says, “*Nobody* is beyond suspicion.”

Others that we have covered already are: “One mustn’t jump to conclusions” and “Don’t make assumptions”. There is also “Murderers just can’t leave well enough alone”—which is very helpful to her.

If Miss Marple finds herself violating or acting contrary to any of these maxims, she knows she is heading into trouble. Psychologists also would do well to heed these same maxims.

Driscoll (1984) has compiled, added to, and elaborated on some Descriptive Psychology principles for doing assessments. They are great training tools because they enumerate some of the possible ways we could go wrong, which in itself is valuable.

*To do case formulations, move from simple description to appraisals.* Thus far, in case formulations, you have been observing and describing. Next you move from the stance of the Observer, merely describing, to the Critic stance, and begin appraising not only what you have observed but also the observations themselves.

One use of the Critic is to check on your own behavior, to look at what you are doing as the Actor and the Observer, and to critically evaluate the process itself and the results of it. What, why, and how are things going in the investigation or assessment? Are my descriptions complete and accurate? Miss Marple constantly checks herself. It sounds like an obvious and trivial point, but this is another important one, particularly both when you’re learning and after you’ve been doing it for a while. My husband, a computer scientist, has asked me, “Do psychologists really do this?” I said, “Well, they do at the beginning, but I think they forget about it for a while. Then they realize that they don’t know so much after all, and they begin hiring consultants again to talk over cases, asking, ‘What am I doing wrong here, anyway?’”

*In case formulation, you give significance descriptions* to understand what motivates people, and to look at what the Actor is doing by doing whatever he is doing. We have our classic example in Descriptive Psychology of the guy in the rolling English countryside who’s moving his arm up and down, and his hand is on a pump, and it’s a water pump, and the water is going into the house, and there’s poison in the water, and so what he’s doing is poisoning the people in the house, and he knows that they’re plotting to overthrow the government, so what he’s really doing is saving the country (Ossorio, 1986). You move up that Significance ladder to understand what the person is doing by doing *that*. For example, a murderer: you think, how could a woman who adopted a girl as a child, murder her? What she was doing, in her mind, is protecting her precious child from being defiled by a man—a very different view, once you see the significance for her.

You have to *know the culture*. You must understand the significance of the behavior in that culture. Here we move into the Descriptive

Psychology concept of community and all that goes with that, and the ways it's been articulated by Putman and others (Putman, 1981). Miss Marple succeeds because she understands small towns in England, and upper class and lower class norms. If you're doing therapy with Japanese-Americans, you'd better know the difference between first-generation and second-generation, and of course, you need also to be able to take several perspectives on any one place, in terms of understanding the culture. In Boulder, Colorado, where I live, you can legitimately see it as a university town, a haven for high-tech entrepreneurs, and as it's been called in the press, "a yuppie, fern-bar town which is populated by drug-dealers and trust-funders", and all of those are accurate, though limited, descriptions.

There is some community that we understand well enough to know what behavior is normative for that community and what is a deviation from it, and that's the one we should serve. Miss Marple even has this subculture of murderers that she's interested in. She says at one point that she doesn't care for flashy murders committed by shallow, uninteresting people. In fact, she says that it's not her cup of tea. Myself, I do understand step-families; I don't understand the culture of drug and alcohol abusers.

We learn about cultures by participating in them. This happens mostly in the course of normal living with other people, during which we "acquire concepts and skills by practice (participation) and experience in one or more of the social practices (customary pursuits, usages) which call for the use of that concept or exercise of that skill" (Maxim 7). We also learn about cultures by instruction in schools or apprenticeships, and by reading or watching videos. All these are ways of participating in cultures.

There's a revealing incident in which Miss Marple becomes acquainted with a new suburb to her familiar village. She is not comfortable with this addition until she goes out and walks through the development, and is in and of it, and talks to the residents there. She moves out from her intimate knowledge of her own community to an understanding and appreciation of the new one. Here we are reminded of Maxim 5: "If a situation calls for a person to do something he cannot do, he will do something he can do—if he does anything at all." Thus Miss Marple starts with what she knows and builds upon that. We also can use our known culture to help us make sense out of a new one, gradually expanding from that base.

*You use different perspectives.* The Judgement Diagram (Shideler, 1988, p. 79) codifies four universal perspectives that give us reasons for doing what we do: the Hedonic, Prudential, Ethical, and Aesthetic, and these tell you a great deal about people's motives. Is their primary motive

pleasure or self-interest or ethical probity or achieving a sense of the fitness of things? There are also the perspectives that come from different roles, and a key to Miss Marple's way of operating is that she has a woman's perspective. A woman's world is typically the world of people and relationships, and understanding relationships is the foundation for her insights. Taking the woman's perspective, she thinks of things that men don't think of. She'll say, "Well, what about the children this woman abandoned years ago?"—none of the men had even thought about the children. Of course, the opposite is true, also. The men see things she doesn't see.

## PERSON CHARACTERISTICS

Now we come to the great realm of Person Characteristics, which is like our crime-investigation kit. These can be assets or even things we think of as liabilities—here is Miss Marple, eighty years old, using her age as an asset. When she is puzzling over why she was selected by Mr. Rafiel in *Nemesis*, she goes through an inventory of her abilities. "Do I know anything about anything?" she asks herself, "Well, let me see: What do I know? Who am I? What am I like?" And she comes up with things like "I'm inquisitive and I do understand about people", and so forth and so on, and in the process of doing that while she was feeling completely lost, suddenly she sees a framework that she can use.

Natural talent plays an important part. Think of those of us who were "playground therapists", probably most of us who have gone into this field. People with problems, even complete strangers, gravitate to us and start revealing their deepest, darkest secrets. There are you, seven years old, and the other kids are hanging around telling you their problems. So there is some natural bent there. Miss Marple's natural gift is described by Mr. Rafiel, who posthumously hires her (by letter, not ghost!) to solve a crime. In his letter, Mr. Rafiel says to her,

I have learnt one thing about a man whom I wish to employ. He has to have a flair. A flair for the particular job I want him to do. It is not knowledge, it is not experience. The only word that describes it fully is *flair*. A natural gift for doing a certain thing.

You, my dear, if I may call you that, have a natural flair for justice, and that has led to your having a natural flair for crime (*Nemesis*, p. 25).

So people quite naturally bring murders to her.

Let us quickly review Miss Marple's Person Characteristics (see Figure 1), beginning with her *Dispositions*.

In *traits*, she is curious, scatter-brained, ruthless in pursuing justice, kindly, intelligent, patient, and respectful. Among her *attitudes* is her

suspicion of the official mind. Her *interests* are small-town life, relationships, solving murders. And her *style* is low-key, pleasant, friendly, harmless, and self-effacing. She is not, in fact, harmless, but her style is non-threatening.

With respect to *Powers*: among her *abilities*, she is a keen observer, she has an excellent memory, she is good at pattern recognition. She has an extensive *knowledge* of human relationships, village life, motives of murderers, how people work. Her central *values* are justice, propriety, consideration for others, stability and orderliness in social life.

Among the *Derivatives*, which affect or modify the powers and dispositions, are her *embodiment*—she is a female homo sapiens; her *capacities* include the potential for learning new concepts, facts, and skills, and for adapting to a variety of situations; conspicuous among her *states* are her physical infirmities.

Some of these qualities are innate potentials that have been developed over time. Others are acquired, consciously or unconsciously, by simply living in a world, and some can be acquired through training. As Maxim 8 says, “If a person has a given person characteristic, he acquired it in one of the ways it can be acquired, i.e., by having the relevant prior capacity and the appropriate intervening history.”

It is essential for clinicians to take a piercing look at themselves, as Miss Marple did, to take this inventory of their tool box and thus determine how these characteristics can best be used to increase the behavior potential not only of others, but ourselves as well, in the process of “untying karmic knots”. Our competence increases with our awareness. Even when we are experienced, the ability to use Descriptive Psychology gives us far greater access to the facts and possible facts about people, and is something you can pull out and work with in difficult cases or when you’re just stuck and don’t know why. For novices, it lays a foundation for acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge for doing our work.

As our competence at detective work or psychological assessment increases, the doing of it becomes more and more effortless and automatic: often Miss Marple looks as if she is just sitting there doing nothing. She and advanced clinicians may not use any of this conceptual structure self-consciously or deliberately. They just do what they do. They may not even be able to tell you what they’re doing—which is why the Neurolinguistic Programming people studied persons like Virginia Satir who couldn’t tell them what they were doing.

However, an observer can identify how the clinician or detective is using the Person Concept, the Maxims, and so on. It happens to me all the time with Descriptive Psychology—I realize that I have been operating with one of the maxims, or people will tell me that I’m using

Descriptive Psychology concepts even though I'm not familiar with those particular ones. Partly this is a matter of natural inclination, partly it is a result of study and work, partly of experience. In addition, Descriptive Psychology is an extremely valuable learning tool. Even when you're experienced, the ability to use the whole system to understand human behavior gives you far greater leverage. Your automatic behavior stops; you say, "Okay, let's get out that table with the Person Concept to see what new ideas we can come out with."

So for novices, it lays the foundation for acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge, and for advanced practitioners, it gives you that tool kit to use when you need it, which is truly more power to *all* people.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude goes to Peter G. Ossorio, whose work has influenced my perspective so persuasively that I no longer know what is derived from Descriptive Psychology and what is not; to Agatha Christie, for giving me a character I could hang my hat on; to the British Broadcasting Corporation for their superior productions of her stories; to Paul Zeiger, whose brain I have picked on a regular basis for twenty years; to all my clients and supervisees in all disciplines; and especially to Mary McDermott Shideler, who reviewed, contributed to, and groomed this work at every stage. Author's address: 604 Tenth Street, Boulder, Colorado 80302.

## NOTES

1. Since all quotations are to Agatha Christie's volumes, the references will be given by title and page numbers, not author and date.

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