The use of metaphor in therapy

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Introductions

Group Introductions – including hopes and fears for the day, why you are here & describe yourself as a therapist metaphorically
Agenda

09:30 – 09:50 Introductions
09:50 – 10:00 Definitions

10:10 – 11:00 Models of Therapy and their use of metaphor (including negative aspects)— what the literature tells us.

11:00 – 11:15 Coffee Break

11:15 – 12:00 Findings - a brief discussion including standing-in-for exercise.

12:00 – 12:30 Therapist Generated Metaphors including practice.

12:30 – 13:00 Lunch

13:00 – 13:30 Client Generated Metaphors including exercise.

13:30 – 14:00 Clean language – DVD and demonstration

14:00 – 15:30 Co-constructed/moving metaphors/plus practice

15:30 – 16:00 Conclusion
Some Definitions

METAPHOR

Overarching definition of metaphor: "as the phenomenon whereby we talk, and potentially think about something in terms of something else".

The term metaphor is derived from the Greek word metapherein, to transfer over. The etymological roots of the word are meta meaning beyond or over, plus pherein meaning to bring or bear.

In this context a metaphor is something that is brought or carried over or beyond.
**Similes** make use of the same cognitive mechanism as metaphors and have a rational or logical element to them. For example, ‘she smiled *like a* Cheshire Cat’
Examples of a British culturally specific **metonym** includes ‘the Crown’ meaning the monarchy. An example of a metonym perhaps with a more universal application would be ‘plastic’ meaning credit cards. They stand-in-for.
Deep Metaphors are defined as:

"consistent, recurring images of a life story that give coherence to, and aid in, the interpretation of the events of that life....and are used by clients to both circumscribe and frame possible solutions to the problems in their lives" (Mallinson et al., 1996, p.2).
Cryptophors, are carriers of hidden meaning and are of particular relevance to counselling and psychotherapy (Cox & Theilgaard, 1987).
MODELS & METAPHOR

Person Centred

Rogers uses organic metaphors to describe his approach such as a potato which grows in a dark cellar which reveals an organism's tendencies to self-actualise (Rogers, 1979).

Communication: - Rogers (1973, p.4) could not be clearer when he penned “one overriding theme in my professional life... is my caring about communication. I have wanted to understand, as profoundly as possible, the communication of the other. I have wanted to be understood.”

The absence of the promotion of the specific use of metaphors in the traditional person-centred literature is probably due to the authentic person to person “therapy as relationship encounter” (Rogers, 1962, p.185) stance which takes precedence over techniques and theory (Wyatt, 2001). It is about “a way of being” (Rogers, 1980, p.227).
Empathy is defined by Rogers (1975, p.3) as:

“entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings of which he/she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover feelings of which the person is totally unaware, since this would be too threatening. It includes communicating your sensing of his/her world as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which the individual is fearful. It means frequently checking with him/her as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive. You are a confident companion to the person in his/her inner world.”
There appears to be more explicit reference to the use of metaphors in the *process oriented* literature. Worsley (2002) proposes that meaning is never exhausted and the client’s metaphors are “radically interpersonal” (p.82). He suggests that *client generated* metaphors are crucial in gaining an understanding of meaning and that they “invite shared exploration” (p.82) and the therapist needs to be guarded about what they offer into the client’s metaphor.

Rennie (1998) suggests that the use of metaphor "liberates the secondary stream of consciousness" (p.44).
Sanders (2007, pp.111-112): “therapy is dialogue, is relational... A dialogical approach to therapy is one that emphasises or even rests completely on dialogue, that is, the co-created relationship between helper and the person being helped.”

I propose that the idea of co-created dialogue being a key concept has close connotations to the use of metaphors in therapy.
Knox (2011, p.132):

“Do you know the ...is it, Michelangelo painting in the Sistine Chapel, where you have the two fingers? It’s kind of like that and there comes a point ‘ch-ch-ch’ and the contact is there...”
CBT

Stott et al. (2010) explain the importance of metaphors in CT and CBT: "Cognitive Therapy has, as a central task, the aim of transforming meaning to further the client's goals and help journey towards a more helpful, realistic and adaptive view of the self and the world. Metaphor should therefore be a powerful companion" (p.14).
Whilst Stott et al. (2010) state good reasons to pay close attention to the client's own metaphor, they concede that the majority of metaphors are introduced by the CBT or CT therapist.

Indeed, the greater part of the publication prescribes useful therapist-generated metaphors for certain classes of psychological issues such as Eating Disorders, Psychosis, and Bipolar Disorder.

For example, the metaphor of a pressure cooker is suggested as useful for those clients suffering from anger issues as it illustrates the process of pressure building up during periods of in-assertiveness.

There are many ‘empowering metaphors’ suggested that relate to current scenarios in films and books that could be useful for clients. For example, Gollum's multiple internal voices heard at increased times of stress in The Lord of the Rings.
Psychodynamic

Enckell (2002) suggests that the specific way the unconscious endeavours to represent reality is non-literal and is analogous to the theory of metaphor. Thus, a significant element of psychoanalytical investigation is comparable to the reading of metaphors.

Siegelman (1990, p.128) states that: “our inability to see the hidden or implicit metaphors can prevent patients from enlarging the meaning of their experience”.
Freud, (1917, p.295) provides us with a metaphorical description of the unconscious, conscious and the process of censorship:

“Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle with each other like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall is a second narrower room – a kind of drawing room – in which consciousness too resides. But on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his function: he examines the different mental impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit them into the drawing room if they displease him.”
UNSAFE
The use of metaphor in psychotherapy enhances the exchange between the unconscious and conscious realms (the entrance hall and the drawing room) as the metaphor can bypass the client’s censoring defences. Metaphors allow the client: “safe access to hitherto buried (and guarded) experience” (Cox & Theilgaard, 1987, p.69).
In psychodynamic terms, metaphors are containers for powerful emotions to be processed in ways that are safe (Spandler et al., 2013). Or to coin a psychoanalytical term, therapeutic metaphors can be viewed as transitional objects. Winnicot (1953, p.4) describes a ‘transitional object’ as:

"..perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism, which becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of depressive type. Perhaps some soft object or type of object has been found and used by the infant, and this then becomes what I am calling a transitional object."

In the same way the infant substitutes Mother with a teddy or a thumb to reduce their anxiety through a safe indirect available container, psychoanalytically clients use metaphors to process drives and desires from censored to uncensored and acceptable concepts in a safe and acceptable form.
Working with dreams can be an fundamental element of a Jungian Analyst’s work with their client and can indicate unconscious wish fulfilment and latent transferential issues (Sharpe, 1988). Sharpe (1988, p.7) suggests that dreams indicate the individual psychical product of the individual:

“The dream-life holds within itself not only the evidence of instinctual drives and mechanisms, by which those dreams are harnessed or neutralised, but also the actual experiences through which we have passed...dreams are like individual works of art.”
Deep metaphorical visualisations that clients access during therapy, referred to in Rice (1974) as evocative reflections. I find that symbols, dreams, imagery, visualisation are all metaphoric messages from the unconscious that help us conceive the world in a meaningful and safe way, and connect our emotions with the visual.
Negative Aspects

Potential pitfalls with using metaphors;

1. overvaluing
2. undervaluing
3. literalizing
4. an appealing metaphor may stand in the way of a less elegant more appropriate description
5. focusing on metaphors may take us away from deeper social meanings
6. oversimplification can follow metaphors
7. the ‘poorly timed’ metaphor introduced by the therapist when the client is silent and ‘creatively reflective’ is regarded by some (C&T)as ill placed and contaminating
8. metaphors should have a therapeutic insightful element and not involve a “string of avoidance”.
9. a client may not wish to engage with metaphors, particularly if it has been introduced by the therapist, factors may include low self-esteem or a difficulty to visualise
10. metaphors can be used by clients as a way of avoiding conflict or as part of a power struggle with their counsellor
There may also be difficulties relating to certain mental health issues, for example, the following of client generated metaphors with those with Psychosis or Borderline Personality Disorders can make them become extremely anxious as they may experience metaphors as a form of direct revelation of a concrete, and often ruthless reality. I would add that a significant percentage of clients on the Autistic Spectrum can also struggle with the non-logical viewpoint that metaphors engage.
Milioni (2007) points to the danger of the therapist using the client’s metaphor as a ‘silencing device’. In such cases the client’s world-view is closed down in favour of the therapist’s interpretation. Cox & Theilgaard (1987, p.61) metaphorically describe this potentiality: “If the therapist is too predatory he may damage the humming bird with the lasso”.
FINDINGS

A BRIEF DISCUSSION
Metaphors used in Counselling & Psychotherapy

Place

Mutuality

Depth

Pervasiveness

Hope

Standing-in-for
I am like the wind
I am the train on the tracks
that runs and runs and runs

I am from you me us them

I am like the glue that binds
the magnet that repels
the missing in the fog

I am like my child
I can play I can smile can cry
I can find strength from here

I am like a bird
I can fly I can drift
as high as the cloud
I can burrow deep into the cloud

I am always there ready
on the shelf in the dream
in this moment

I am like the creator
I can change colour shape
Your world and mine

I am like the gift
the chameleon pathway to your mind

I am like the knot in your gut
I rest in your heart I rest in your neck
like the blade in your side
I hold the dreams you cannot tell

I am like what you are like
change me you
our hills caves and dance floors

I am like the monster sleeping in the dark
that can lead to doors
doors hiding smiles behind

I am like the crack in the cult
the safe dungeon the shiny hub
the frozen rose

I am like the tissues in the box
I am hope

I am like.
The therapist is a metaphor for a lover, a caregiver, a teacher, a maiden, a shaman. You are a shape shifter, a chameleon, "whoever your client needs you to be. While still being yourself".
Standing-in-for – Exercise
ORIGINATION & DEVELOPMENT

Therapist Generated
Client Generated
Co-Created
Therapist Generated Metaphors

‘Bank Metaphors’ or ‘off-the-shelf’ metaphors include:-
Castles
Trains
Wheels
Rivers
Trees (& Plants)
Desert Islands
Poems/Literature/Films/TV/Radio/Plays – cultural metaphors?
Shapes (Tomkins)
Discern, formulate, potentiate, and reflect mutative metaphorical material.
Attend. Witness Wait.” C&T.
The Black Parrot

By Dorothy Nimmo

Kill the black parrot. Choke the sodding bird,
it never said a kind thing or a true word,
or if it did that wasn't what I heard.
I only heard it squawking in my ear
things no-one in their right mind wants to hear
that made me cold with shame and white with fear.

Behave yourself. Control yourself. You know
you don't think that, you only think you do.
You can't just please yourself, I told you so.
You're being selfish. It's for your own good.
You must. You must not. But you know you should.

If you try harder, I am sure you could.
I'm disappointed in you. Never say I didn't tell you.

But you had your own way, you'd not be told. There'll be a price to pay.

Where was it polly learned that canting word?
It's time to wring its neck, the stupid bird.

What made us think that was the voice of God?

1. Nimmo (1993, 3-4)
Wheel of Relationship
Tree of well-being
Experiential

In small groups discuss any metaphors that you introduce to clients and the context in which you will introduce them – any ‘case-studies’?
Client Generated Metaphors
Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.233) note “In therapy, much of self-understanding involves consciously recognising previously unconscious metaphors and how we live by them”.

Further, as Ricoeur (1986) recognises, the metaphor needs to be isomorphic to the problem, the story and the situation of the client himself so that he can recognise himself in it and find out new ways to perceive his difficulties.
Samuel Beckett’s ‘Happy Days’
"Mrs. Potter's Lullaby"

Well I woke up in mid afternoon cause that's when it all hurts the most
I dream I never know anyone at the party and I'm always the host
If dreams are like movies then memories are films about ghosts
You can never escape, you can only move south down the coast
Well I am an idiot walking a tightrope of fortune and fame
I am an acrobat swinging trapezes through circles of flame
If you've never stared off into the distance then your life is a shame
And though I'll never forget your face sometimes I can't remember my name
Hey, Mrs. Potter, don't cry
Hey, Mrs. Potter, I know why
But, hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me
Well there's a piece of Maria in every song that I sing
And the price of a memory is the memory of the sorrow it brings
And there is always one last light to turn out and one last bell to ring
And the last one out of the circus has to lock up everything
Or the elephants will get out and forget to remember what you said
Oh and the ghosts of the tilt-o-whirl will linger inside of your head
Oh and the Ferris wheel junkies will spin there forever instead
When I see you, a blanket of stars covers me in my bed
Hey, Mrs. Potter, don't go, I said
Hey, Mrs. Potter, I don't know, but
Hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me
Well all the blue light reflections that color my mind when I sleep
And the lovesick rejections that accompany the company I keep
All the razor perceptions that cut just a little too deep
Hey, I can bleed as well as anyone but I need someone to help me sleep
So I throw my hand into the air and it swims in the beams
It's just a brief interruption of the swirling dust sparkle jet stream
Well I know I don't know you and you're probably not what you seem
Aw, but I'd sure like to find out
So why don't you climb down off that movie screen
Hey, Mrs. Potter, don't turn
Hey, Mrs. Potter, I burn for you
Hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me
When the last king of Hollywood shatters his glass on the floor
And orders another
Well, I wonder what he did that for
That's when I know that I have to get out cause I have been there before
So I gave up my seat at the bar and I head for the door. Yeah.
We drove out to the desert just to lie down beneath this bowl of stars
We stand up in the Palace, like it's the last of the great pioneer town bars
Aw, we shout out these songs against the clang of electric guitars
Well, you can see a million miles tonight
But you can't get very far
Aw, you can see a million miles tonight
But you can't get very far
Hey, Mrs. Potter, I won't touch and
Hey, Mrs. Potter, it's not much but
Hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me [3X]
Clean Language

David Grove DVD (10 mins) & Explanation
Example of working with Mrs Potter metaphors
Experiential of working with each other.
Social & Cultural Aspects of Metaphors in Therapy – The Co-Created/Moving Metaphor
“The meaning of metaphor is revealed within a personal and cultural context, within a society of utterances”

(Hobson, 1985, p.60)
Cox & Theilgaard (1987, p.49): (Client) “because I don’t begin. You induce beginning in me”.

“It is the impact of the inner world of the patient on that of the therapist and vice versa which promotes movement”.

I would tentatively offer my view on this phenomenon that metaphors arise from the therapeutic relationship and for them to be therapeutically useful they need to be mutually understood and developed (they need to impact on each other’s ‘inner world’). Counselling and psychotherapy is about dialogue and conversation in a given context (Hobson, 1985). Even in person-centred circles it is now accepted that the therapist inevitably influences what is said, it is a co-constructive, contextualised process (Worsley, 2002).
“the reflection of being and object of reflection are defined through each other, they are co-constituted. We are actively involved in any experience and what we experience is co-constructed by us and by the object/person that we encounter – any experience of relationship says as much about me as it does the other, it is a co-constructed relationship.”

(Van Deurzen & Young, 2009, p.208).
Time to practice ........

Deep metaphors
Co-constructed/Client Generated/Therapist Generated
Mutual Development
Moving
State?
References

A full list of references is available along with a copy of the thesis by emailing me at jonathan@calmminds.com

Or call 0161 439 7773
Conclusion

Feedback

Final Questions

Future workshops

Hopes & Fears