



Holistic-Metaphorical Therapy and Adlerian Brief Psychotherapy

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Introduction

Adler begins his book, *What Life Should Mean to You* (Adler, 1958), with the sentence "Human beings live in the realm of meanings" (p. 1). He states that "We experience reality always through the meaning we give it; not in itself, but as something interpreted" (p. 1).

Brief psychotherapy requires that we quickly understand the client's meaning in relation to a specific problem situation.

In this paper I will present an approach to identifying, exploring, and transforming subjective meaning based on holistic principles and the premise that human beings construct the meaning of reality metaphorically.

I will argue that *linguistically embedded metaphors* reflect a person's creative, holistic construction of the meaning of the situation represented by the metaphor. Further, linguistically embedded metaphors are seen as symbolic/imaginal representations of the life-style and private logic (Dreikurs, 1973), which serve to unify beliefs, feelings, cognitions, and behaviors. Thus, doing therapy in the "metaphorical domain" can facilitate significant and immediate holistic change.

Ansbacher (1972) points out that in brief psychotherapy, the therapy interview must focus on a specific problem, and must be goal- and action-oriented.

In the holistic-metaphorical approach, the focus is on the client's style of language, conveyed through the metaphors used in discussing the problem situation. Having explored the client's meta-

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phorical meaning, the therapist helps the client to change the meaning by transforming the metaphor. This metaphorical transformation can stimulate a change in the pattern of beliefs, feelings, cognitions, and behavior associated with the problem situation represented by the metaphor. This brief intervention usually takes about five minutes.

I will first discuss the relationship between metaphor and meaning. Specific interventions will then be explored and illustrated.

Meaning and Metaphor

Linguistically embedded metaphors, i.e., metaphors spontaneously generated in the context of spoken communication, involve seeing (more specifically, creating) a resemblance between two different things. (Note: For our purposes, metaphor and simile will be regarded as equivalent.) For example, a client who says "I feel like I'm up against a wall" uses the image of a wall to represent the frustrating situation being discussed in the session. This metaphorical meaning of the situation is expressed by the person in the moment of creating the metaphor. Following Vaihinger (1925), a metaphor is an "as if" fiction, for it is as if the actual situation were a wall.

All metaphors involve comparisons which are not literally true. The client's problem is not literally a wall. Thus, metaphors express unconscious fictions through analogy rather than through logic. Adler (1956) pointed out that "All cognition is the apperception of one thing through another. In understanding, we are always dealing with an analogy" (p. 79). Thus, we can regard metaphors as exquisitely clear, holistic, analogical expressions of apperceptive, cognitive processes.

Identifying Metaphorical Meaning

The therapist must attend to the client's metaphoric expressions. This requires practice, since it is contrary to our normal manner of processing information logically in terms of verbal content. It has been shown that right-hemispheric information processing involves image, analogy, non-linear and holistic thinking, and patterns, whereas left-hemispheric processing relies on logic, language, sequential processing, analytic thinking, and segmentation into parts (Edwards, 1979; Oakley, 1985; Springer & Deutsch, 1985). Metaphors usually involve both image and word, since the metaphor is spoken (or written) in verbal conversation. Thus, therapy conducted in the domain of metaphor appears to involve the whole brain which may account for its impact.

I call this process "listening with the third eye" (after Reik [1948])

Listening With the Third Ear), because information is received by listening but processed visually in the "mind's eye" (Lazarus, 1977; McKim, 1980; Singer & Pope, 1978; Sommer, 1978).

Brief Metaphorical Interventions

Focusing on the metaphoric image representing the situation, the therapist attends to the client's metaphorical speech and selects a metaphor to work with. Interpretation and conceptualization involving theoretical concepts are intentionally avoided during this process.

Adler often described empathy and social interest with the metaphor "To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another" (Adler, 1958, p. 135). Working with metaphors expresses social interest by showing an emphatic understanding of a person as expressed in his/her imaginal/symbolic thought and speech. Also, this approach bypasses resistance since there is little for the client to resist.

Metaphoric Exploration. The therapist facilitates the client's exploration of the metaphor by stimulating an "inner search." This term was originally used to describe an aspect of Ericksonian hypnotherapy (Lankton & Lankton, 1983).

While picturing the metaphoric image in his/her mind's eye, the client is asked to describe his/her specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with the metaphor.

Inviting a Metaphorical Transformation. The therapist asks the client, "If you could change the metaphor (image) in any way so it would be better (more encouraging), how would you change it?"

Suggesting a Metaphorical Transformation. If the client fails to create a transformed metaphor, or if the change is not very encouraging, the therapist suggests changes which might help. To be of value, the change must be accepted by the client. The therapist attends to his/her own images, while asking himself/herself for a more encouraging change in the metaphor. Note that the change should be limited to one aspect of the metaphor.

Relating the metaphoric image to the referent situation. The therapist may ask the client, "How does what we just did relate to your problem situation? Does this suggest any changes you might make in viewing and dealing with the problem?" In actual practice, we have found that many clients make this connection spontaneously.

Case Example

Kathi, a 19-year-old college sophomore, was seen in the college counseling center regarding difficulties she was having with her father and others due to her reluctance to express her true feelings, particularly negative feelings.

In the 10th session of brief therapy she was discussing her anger at someone, when the therapist asked her if she had told the person she was angry. The dialogue went as follows:

K: Well, no, I didn't say I was angry.

T: Why not?

K: I guess I *showed* him I was angry by just clamming up and not saying anything. See, I think that people should be able to read me and know what I'm feeling without my having to tell them. I think I make it obvious enough.

T: (Focusing on the metaphoric image) People should be able to read you?

K: Yeah, I think I make it as plain as words on a page.

T: (Exploring the metaphor) Well, that would make you like a book, wouldn't it?

K: Yeah, I guess.

T: But what you've told me over and over is that this doesn't work for you. People have trouble reading you.

K: (smiles) Yeah, they do.

T: Well, books are fine if people take the time to read them. But they are also quiet. You can't hear them. (At this point the therapist should *invite* the client to transform the metaphor, perhaps by saying "How might you change the image of a 'book' or 'words on a page' so that others would understand you better?") (Transformating the metaphor) What if you were a television? Then people could both see and hear how you were feeling.

K: I get it (laughs). And when I didn't want to broadcast anymore, I could just turn myself off.

T: That's right. Looking at it like that puts you in a more active role, rather than passive like a book?

K: Yeah, I see exactly what you're saying.

T: (Relating the metaphor to the situation) Think you could try that out the next time you're mad?

K: Yes.

T: (Note: the therapist could ask, "What might you do?")

After this interchange, things improved for Kathi in her interactions with her father and others. She began expressing her feelings directly and effectively, and she became noticeably more enthusiastic and active in therapy and in her other relationships.

Summary

Holistic-metaphorical therapy is an approach to understanding and changing the meaning a person gives to a situation. While focusing on the client's style of language, especially linguistically embedded metaphors, several brief intervention steps were presented for exploring and transforming metaphors in order to stimulate constructive change in the problem situation. A case example was discussed which illustrates this approach.

Reference Note

The author would like to thank Michael Malnion, a graduate student at the California School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles, for providing the case material.

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