The Therapeutic Use of Metaphor in Interactive Drawing Therapy

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Abstract

This article is based on a dissertation carried out by Christine as part of her MEd in Counselling at the University of Auckland in 2004. It comprises the results of an investigation into the therapeutic use of client-generated metaphor in Interactive Drawing Therapy (IDT), where it is expressed in visual form and claims to make a contribution to the change-making process. The use of metaphor in IDT is discussed in relation to findings in the literature. A small field study presents the results of a qualitative inquiry into how five trained and experienced IDT therapists used metaphor with selected clients to facilitate therapeutic change. The results suggest that metaphor expressed in visual form and used in the IDT process is a powerful means of accessing aspects of the psyche and facilitating therapeutic change.

Literature review

Defining metaphor

There has been, and still is, much debate about the definition of metaphor (Rhodes & Jakes, 2004). The definition of metaphor given by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which holds that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another' (p. 5), appears to be the most influential (Rhodes & Jakes, 2004). In IDT, therapeutically significant metaphors appear to be those that are generated spontaneously by the client and which encapsulate and help name their personal experience, rather than those that are chosen for the client and introduced by the counsellor.

The general use of metaphor in therapy

Metaphor can be used to refer to different aspects of a person's psychological make-up (here referred to as one's 'psyche') or to one's life experiences. From a cognitive perspective, besides depicting external events, Wickman et al. (1999) argue that counsellors can use conceptual metaphor as a tool for gaining access to and understanding the inner worlds of clients, and point out how communication between

people can be improved if they understand each other's metaphors. This fits in with Kopp's (1995) framework of cognitive-metaphoric structures called metaphorms, with particular reference to the three categories of 'self', 'other' and 'self-in-relation-to-other'. In contrast, McMullen and Conway's (1996) framework emphasises metaphorical self-representations and metaphors of emotion or about emotion.

At the emotional level, metaphor has evocative power, and has been historically used 'to access a wellspring of emotions by exposing intimate connections at the deepest level of human experience' (Zindel, 2001, p. 9). At such a deep level, the discovery of appropriate personal metaphors can give meaning and purpose to our soul (Frankl, cited in Wickman et al., 1999; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). At this deeper level also, Siegelman (1990) describes the relationship between metaphor and the collective unconscious, suggesting that our most pregnant symbols arise from the collective unconscious. In general, however, while therapists can use the metaphorical construct of 'parts' to map the inner aspects of the personality, all parts are in dynamic interplay and there is a holistic, integrating function. Thus, metaphor also refers to the whole of the psyche, and 'metaphorical communication involves the integration of whole brain processes' (DiGiuseppe & Muran, 1992). For example, the self-concept is very much an integrating concept (Everts, 2002) which is frequently expressed metaphorically.

IDT and aspects of the psyche that metaphor refers to

IDT shares many of the analytical psychotherapy perspectives described above (Douglas, 1995; Withers, 2001a, 2001b, 2006). What it emphasises, however, is that metaphors usually have a visual component, and can therefore be easily put into drawing form. They are often about situational experiences and have a strong kinaesthetic quality. Thus, when a metaphor arises, it can be approached literally and expressed visually: 'Draw a picture of something that has got stuck.' The nature of metaphors differs according to the aspect or part of the client that is to the fore, and they most commonly occur when clients have moved away from simple descriptive cognition to imaginative cognition. This is fundamental to the IDT process, which involves the act of drawing and reflecting on the picture – including the words within it.

Metaphorical drawings link words with images on the page, and unite verbal cognition with imaginative cognition (Kopp, 1995), while the act of drawing unites these with the kinaesthetic dimension. A drawing in IDT can reveal a part of the client to him- or herself. For example, a drawing of a wide, flat, barren plain with a small oasis in the middle and a hot sun beaming down from the top can be considered to

reveal three distinctly different parts of the inner schema. From the perspective of emotions, IDT considers that feeling states are influential in triggering metaphors, as in 'I am feeling as though I have come up against a dead end.' Feelings are considered in IDT to reflect people's values, or what they have become attached to, and visual metaphors arising from any particular part of the client will carry the feeling tone and bias of that part.

IDT and the use of metaphor in the process of therapy

IDT has specific process interventions for using metaphor. For example, the counsellor can do this by holding the drawn page out at a distance so that the client can observe it in a more detached manner, and allow the impact of the drawing to 'talk back' to them. The counsellor can help the client draw out the story surrounding the metaphor by having them put it into a visual context. This is done using the IDT technique of moving round a 'triangle' consisting of words, visual images and feelings/behaviours. Asking the client to add detail helps to draw out the implications of the metaphor and, as one thing is attended to, more comes up. As the visually manifested story around the metaphor is developed, it reveals more and more of the client to him- or herself. Putting this out on the page enables the client to reflect on the drawing and modify it in a way that is therapeutically helpful. Clients can often feel safer communicating in visual metaphor, whereas literal talk can be re-traumatising. Furthermore, safety can be added to a drawing in metaphorical terms. For example, a drawing of a car out of control (metaphor of self) might have a large airbag drawn around it.

Although literally impossible, these client-initiated responses seem quite reasonable for the client when working with metaphor. Visual metaphor can allow aspects of the client's psyche to be recognised, and that process of integrated seeing can bring about change. Clients can use metaphor to access wise and resourceful parts, like the archetypal 'hero'. In the first half of the client's therapeutic process metaphors often represent conflict, whereas in the second half of the therapeutic process they commonly depict alliance.

In IDT's theoretical rationale and clinical practice, therefore, the relationship between metaphor and the therapeutic process is seen as a close and powerful one. However, the systematic description and critical analysis of the many propositions noted is very limited at this stage of IDT's development (Everts & Withers, 2006). The field study described below, which is part of this investigation, seeks to illustrate some of these points.

Methodology of the field study

The primary aim of the field study was to investigate how a small sample of counsellors and therapists with training and experience in IDT used visual metaphor therapeutically in their work with clients, and to examine the meaning of this against the wider perspective of the therapeutic use of metaphor as described in the literature. The participants in this study were five experienced and professionally qualified practitioners of IDT. They obtained client permission for use of case data in the form of drawings made during therapy. The confined nature of this study prevented independent contact by the researcher with clients, thus limiting the strength of conclusions that could be derived from the data.

In accordance with University of Auckland ethical requirements, all participants received 'Participant Information Sheets' and were given the 'IDT Evaluation Interview', which covered many of the issues in the 'IDT Survey' (Everts & Withers, 2006). Interviews were taped, transcribed and returned to participants for checking and editing. Participants also agreed to apply (with client consent) a 'Record of IDT Use' and to borrow from the client some of their drawings for examining the portrayal of metaphor. All identifying information about therapists and clients was carefully excluded from the data analysis and reports. Specific information was collected on how visual metaphor featured in the process and outcome of therapy. In the interview transcripts, each instance of visual metaphor used was highlighted as it arose. Each such metaphor was then listed alongside its function in the context of the therapy. Any general comments made by the therapists about the use of metaphor in IDT were noted separately. The resulting list of metaphors was then analysed to determine a system of classification. This classification draws in part on the frameworks of Kopp (1995) and McMullen and Conway (1996).

Results of the field study

Participants

Five therapists, all Pakeha New Zealanders, were interviewed. They had responded to a request by Christine Stone at the 2004 IDT Conference to participate in this study. All had professional qualifications in counselling or psychotherapy and two were qualified supervisors. Between them they had experience in a range of modalities, and they believed that their general professional training in therapeutic process provided an essential background to their work with IDT. Four of the therapists had completed the Advanced Course in IDT between 1996 and 1999, and two of these had repeated it, one in 2000 and one in 2004. One of the participants had only completed the IDT Founda-

tion Course. Three had also attended IDT continuing professional development day courses. Three stated that they were very confident in their use of IDT in their current work with clients, and two that they were reasonably confident. Twelve clients were involved in the study, with all cases selected as being successful, substantial, with ample use of drawings, and having client approval for their use. Therapists A, D and E each provided data on two clients, and therapists B and C provided data on three cases. Each case was assigned a code, according to the code of the therapist. Eight were women, ranging in age from 21 to 60 years. Seven of the women were Pakeha, while one was part Maori. The four men ranged in age from 30 to 50 and were all Pakeha.

Scope of metaphors used

Analysis of the transcripts of the 12 reported cases revealed a total of 51 metaphors which had a therapeutic function, excluding those that were referred to in passing. All appeared as images in client drawings, but were described verbally by the therapists. They were assigned to categories in order to highlight the frequency of occurrence of the different types, and to provide a coherent framework for presenting the data, as follows:

Metaphors of self (n = 22)

This group includes those metaphors that were a noun, or a phrase containing a noun (vehicle), and were used by the client to refer to self or a part of self (topic). For example, the client might draw a picture of a building (vehicle) which was about him- or herself (topic).

Metaphors of other (n = 3)

Metaphors in this group were those that were a noun, or a phrase containing a noun (vehicle), and were used to refer to someone else (topic).

Metaphors of self-in-relation-to-other (n = 1)

The only metaphor in this category referred primarily to a relationship with others. Although self was depicted metaphorically, the meaning of the metaphor was understood in the context of this relationship.

Metaphors of feeling states (n = 16)

Metaphors in every category were intensely personal and referred to feelings. However, the metaphors in this category were predominantly about feelings, and if self was present in the drawing, it was represented literally.

Metaphors of 'the journey' and places on the way (n = 8)

These fell within the conceptual metaphor 'Life is a journey', and within that, 'Therapy is a journey'. The self was represented literally, but as being at various places on the journey that were represented metaphorically.

   In the sections that follow, metaphors are presented in the order given above. The verbatim accounts of the therapists are the main focus, and these are enclosed in quotation marks. Passages have been selected that contain the metaphor, show its meaning for the client, and illustrate the way or ways in which it was used in the therapy. The metaphor appears in italic script.

Metaphors of self

These are presented in a sequence in which similar themes are linked. Several metaphors of self were connected to early trauma. They became vehicles for working with and healing the trauma. Therapist A described a case involving sexual abuse trauma in which the client drew an image of a *smiley face* representing:

> 'Well, I've put this on, but there's no feeling for the rest of my body. My face is quite dissociated from the rest of me.'

This image appeared in a drawing in the first session:

> 'It became a kind of icon for her for most of her journey … She felt she had to present to the world *a smiley face*. And so we had innumerable variations on the *smiley face* right throughout most of her therapeutic process. Sometimes it was a sad face, but that face always appeared in her drawings somewhere … that was her constant metaphor that she found by herself.'

It was also used with this client to externalise and work with intra-psychic parts.

> 'She's had in the past a *smiley face* which sits here [on her shoulder] that represents good, and a down face on this side which represents evil, and she used to talk about these two that would sit on her shoulders and tempt her, and that was another use of *the smiley face* … It was also her notion of spirituality, her notion that there is good and evil in the world … and sometimes the evil will tempt you into places like self-abuse and going back into an abusive relationship.'

The metaphor gave the client the opportunity to expand her sense of self by connecting with fun and creativity.

'She used to say that she found herself being quite creative if she could put something on the page, even if it was a repetition of the *smiley* … And to come to a place where you could laugh about what you were doing in therapy was huge for her, that there was some fun in it as well …'

Finally, this metaphor was used to represent goals in the therapy.

'I think the metaphor was just all the way through that process of saying to her, that I suppose the *smiley face* was an OK image, but it had to be matched on the inside as well. And she knew very well that it didn't … Finally there was a *smiley face* on the inside as well.'

Metaphors for other

Several clear metaphors for other were reported. Therapist E described how a client used metaphor to express himself to his abuser and resolve something for himself.

'This client used the metaphor of *the snake pit*, and drew a snake pit with writhing snakes that represented the abuser.'

This metaphor was extended into action with psychodrama.

'So he drew the picture [of the *snake pit*] there and I held it up. But soon, and this person would stand up anyway, he put it out there on top of the cushion and I stood alongside him doubling, just being with him.'

Metaphor for self in relation to other

A metaphor for self in relation to others was instrumental in helping this same client resolve her issues in relation to the *spider*.

'When I asked my client to put herself on the page, surprise surprise, she drew an *elephant*. And she said there were a lot more elephants she was with … a *herd of elephants*. There were four other managers she was working with, and she came to the understanding as she drew that an *elephant* doesn't even need to be scared of a *spider*.'

Metaphors for feeling states

The metaphors for feeling states fell into two sub-categories. The first involved situations in which the self was present but not represented figuratively. The situation itself was a metaphorical representation of a feeling state. The second involved metaphors in which a noun (vehicle) was a representation of a feeling state (topic).

For example, one client of therapist C used metaphor to explore his fear.

> 'He said he was afraid to go forward, and the fear was one of failure … and "What does that look like, or feel like in some way you may depict it?" and he showed himself *with this huge stone*, and himself over here.'

Staying within the metaphor helped the client find solutions.

> 'And then we talked about, "Well, that *huge stone in front of you*, what can't you do with that *huge stone*?"… And he actually got to it. He said, "Well, I could go round it." So being able to externalise it like this helped him see a way he wouldn't have thought of otherwise.'

It also helped him envisage the future and manage his feelings.

> '"So having gone round it, what would you do?" And he was then going to start looking for suitable positions to work in and increase his social life. And "If you did these things, what would happen to the stone?" And then he drew a new *stone* that was nothing more than a pebble. "And I'll be going away from fear, and I want to put fear behind me."'

Metaphors of 'the journey'

There are several metaphors that refer to parts of the journey, and some that refer to special places created by the client along the way. Therapist A's client used metaphors to refer to safe places she would go to. These metaphors allowed her to work safely with the effects of trauma. The first was:

> 'One of the ways that she recognised that she beat herself up, was that she had a huge *closet* she used to go into, and she'd been going into this *closet* since she was a little girl. It was her safe place.'

This metaphor of the *closet* was extended with the use of the client's first metaphor, and another metaphor introduced by the therapist. In this case the metaphor had a psycho-educational function.

> 'The *smiley face* bird had drawers in it, right deep inside its body, and each drawer had a different feeling … That was a book I read her, and it was about this feeling bird, and it was to help her understand that it was OK to feel …'

The extended metaphor of a *closet with drawers* was used to work with the safe management of feelings.

'So we spent a long time drawing this *closet*, from the outside first of all because it was not an easy place to get near, not an easy place to put on the page or identify with … This *closet* had basically travelled with her through her life. Then we were able … she recognised that there were drawers in this *closet* … to open and close the different drawers, which actually gave her some control.'

The client used this metaphor as a marker of progress in her therapy.

'So that was an absolute major breakthrough for her, that she didn't need to beat herself up anymore, because she actually then didn't need to go into the *closet*.'

General comments on metaphor from the therapists

Several therapists commented on the usefulness of having the visual metaphor to refer to in subsequent sessions. For example, therapist C said:

'I'm very aware that I bounce back into externalising this thing so that it becomes a shared language … After a week had passed, you could ask, what's happened to that [metaphor] this week?'

Therapist D referred to the memorability of visual metaphor for both client and therapist:

'These metaphors stay powerful even when you've gone past them. They remember their significant drawings.'

Therapist B talked about how insight can occur when metaphor is put on the page in a visual form.

'It also causes change. It helps the "aha" experience. I would call the "aha" the embodied insight. It works at that deeper level … So it's not just about communicating. It's like the person goes into a state where change is more available. There's a whole different energy about it. You can see that the person is in a different brainwave phase, or something like that, and in that space they make connections. And it's not temporary. A shift happens.'

Therapist D offered these comments:

'When you have spoken metaphor, you're waiting to hear what happens next. There's a story usually in it. But when there's a picture, you just have to look at it and it's all there.'

Discussion of the results

This study is an exploratory inquiry into the therapeutic use of visual metaphor, and the therapist participants are a small number of enthusiastic, skilled and experienced professionals who used IDT with clients who were obviously capable of working constructively with it. All but one of the clients were Pakeha. Taken together, these results must therefore be read with caution, and regarded as indicative rather than conclusive. However, all the results presented above were based on the specific use of visual metaphor as propounded by IDT, and used therapeutic practices in accordance with the teachings of Withers (2006). Taken together, the findings of this study support two major propositions, discussed below.

Visual metaphors can refer to all aspects of the psyche

The results confirm the proposition that all aspects of the psyche can be represented in visual metaphor, which comprises both pictures and words on a page. For example, metaphors expressed as drawings are a product of metaphoric cognition (Kopp, 1995), as illustrated in the theme 'Life is a journey', which appears in such metaphors as *steps, pathways, lost ground*, and the *maze*. Nearly all of Greenberg's (2002) 15 emotion categories in therapy are found, such as pain (the *dark cloud*); anger (the *cloud of daggers*); loneliness (*missing the bus*); fear (*facing the tsunami*); and joy (the *cake* with cherries on top). Most metaphors in the results also have a kinaesthetic quality (the *karate chop*; being *bloated from swallowing hurt*). Some refer to the soul (the *tree with deep roots*). Some link with the archetypal themes (the *child with worms for hair* from a dream, or the *cave*). Some represent the self (the *engine, house with shaky foundations*, or *designer shoe*). All of these metaphoric images can be represented in the form of powerful drawings.

The metaphors in these results mostly exist as a visual gestalt of meaning representing various aspects of the psyche, both conscious and unconscious. They refer to intra-psychic reality, especially feelings and sense of self. In some cases they refer to subjective feelings about other. The point must be made, however, that these findings are essentially mono-cultural, and that the meaning of metaphor may be culture-bound. In further investigations, the influence of culture must be systematically investigated.

Visual metaphors reported as facilitating therapeutic change

Client-generated metaphors in these results were consistently reported as facilitating therapeutic change, with explication taking place in relation to the selected drawing rather than in purely verbal dialogue, as found in most other approaches. For

example, the shared use of metaphor helped facilitate problem exploration, as in 'What's happened to the *dark cloud* this week?' and the empathic presence of 'another *plane*' (i.e. the therapist) on the airstrip.

Feelings that were difficult to communicate in words were expressed in visual metaphor, as in the *smiley face*, the *cockroach*, and shrinking a *huge stone* to a *pebble*. Insight was gained through the cognitive understanding of parts of self (the *smiley face* which represents a mask disconnected from authentic feelings), through the encapsulation of major themes (the metaphor of the *Titanic* as representing 'getting onto the wrong boat'), or through just seeing a visual image – all of which helped clients make connections that led to increased awareness and understanding. Visual metaphor appeared to help clients change their dysfunctional beliefs or scripts (for example, the *plane* metaphor helped a client change his beliefs about the stigma of depression and find that he could take journeys in spite of it). There were a number of drawn metaphors that demonstrated how goals for the future might be identified through finding resources within the context of the metaphor – such as a team of experts to fix the *house with shaky foundations*, or a search and rescue team for the one on *the edge of a cliff*.

Visual metaphor – general comments

These findings highlight the role of visual metaphor as used in IDT, and suggest some advantages it may have in therapy over purely spoken metaphor. The IDT process works to keep the client 'within the domain of his creative metaphoric imagination' (Kopp, 1995, p. 7) which is both an internal state and a holistic process, involving processes in both the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Visual imagery has a central role in the dynamics of the psyche according to Jung (cited in Shaw, 1995) and, if most of our thinking is in images, it is not surprising that clients resort to visual metaphor to communicate. The act of drawing a visual metaphor can help bypass difficulties in finding the right words. Metaphor is compact, vivid and therefore memorable. As put by Miller (cited in Kopp, 1995), 'mental models, for example, mental images, are better remembered than propositional representations of a phenomenon' (p. 97). Significantly, the client is in charge of the process of drawing, and thus in charge of their metaphorical images. The therapist must follow, trusting the process.

Conclusions

Contemporary understandings of metaphor have stimulated the growth of knowledge about how client-generated metaphor can be used in therapy (Kopp, 1995; Siegelman,

1990; Sims, 2003). IDT is an approach to therapy that recognises the importance of imagination and metaphor in problem-solving and the visual nature of much of our thinking – which can make it an effective medium for working with metaphor. The results of a small qualitative enquiry into how five practising IDT therapists used visual metaphor in their work with clients demonstrate how it can be a powerful tool. Client-generated metaphors expressed as drawings appear to be able to refer to all aspects of the psyche, the most prominent of them being metaphors for self and for feeling states.

Also in the results are examples of how therapists used the IDT process of drawing out the story of the metaphor. This technique is congruent with other models described in the literature for working with clients' metaphors to facilitate change. However, the visual dimension in IDT adds breadth and depth to the process of explicating a metaphor by externalising and concretising it. Externalisation of the metaphor allows the client to detach from the image in a way that allows it to be viewed more objectively and, through its associative power, reveal more of the client's psyche to them as the context unfolds. Creative solutions and possibilities for behaviour change may be found within the metaphor. Furthermore, the process of concretising the image in a drawing makes it more vivid and memorable. Finally, all the processes empirically associated with change are represented in metaphor in this survey, including building the therapeutic relationship, expressing painful feelings, gaining insight, changing beliefs, and the process of connecting with the future as a precursor to change.

This is an initial study based on a very small sample which is not necessarily representative of IDT therapists, and which is highly mono-cultural. In addition, there are no client comments to validate practitioner results. Thus the results of the study must be seen as tentative and indicative, rather than conclusive. However, they do contribute to the beginnings of a rationale for the therapeutic use of metaphor in IDT, and to the use of metaphor in therapy in general, highlighting what a powerful resource such visual metaphor can be. Based on the current findings, two recommendations for further research investigation can be made:

- The conduct of a more large-scale systematic survey of IDT practitioners into their use of visual metaphor, in which the evaluative comments of both therapists and clients are included.
- As part of this, or separately, a study of the relationship between level of IDT training and the effectiveness of use of visual imagery – in recognition of the fact that the substance and therapeutic management of metaphor is both complex and subtle.

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