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Metaphors: An avenue to other techniques

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Metaphors: An avenue to other techniques

Abstract

"To describe life we need metaphors: objectivity will not suffice" (Minuchin, 1984, p. 11). Metaphors are a method to enhance our language, providing a clearer, more concrete understanding of the situations in life. The use of metaphors helps prepare clients to experience other therapeutic interventions more readily. Low functioning clients commonly have difficulty with therapeutic approaches which require abstract thinking. By normalizing and reframing the problem, metaphors provide openings for other therapies.

METAPHORS

AN AVENUE TO OTHER TECHNIQUES

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"To describe life we need metaphors: objectivity
will not suffice" (Minuchin, 1984, p. 11). Metaphors
are a method to enhance our language, providing a
clearer, more concrete understanding of the situations
in life. The use of metaphors helps prepare clients to
experience other therapeutic interventions more readily.
Low functioning clients commonly have difficulty with
therapeutic approaches which require abstract thinking.
By normalizing and reframing the problem, metaphors
provide openings for other therapies.

Currently, counseling is being utilized in schools
to address an extraordinary variety of problems that
have not been reported until relatively recently
(Madanes, 1990). Only in the past decade have
situations such as drug abuse, suicide, and sexual and
physical abuse surfaced as problems which must be dealt
with by the school counselor and other school personnel.

In addition to the existing diversity of problems,
new issues and problems are constantly emerging.

Unfortunately, the problems in schools change and surface just as the problems of a society do. The effective school counselor must be able to employ a variety of techniques and interventions. Just as the diversity of problems in our present day society has emerged, so has the need for a variety of approaches to address these problems (Madanes, 1990). The argument of whether there is a need for an adaptable counselor is no longer an issue. The problems are here to stay and so is the need for a counselor who is trained in eclectic techniques and interventions. Emphasis is on counselor versatility, personal development, and observation of the individual needs of the client (McDowell, Bills, Eaton, 1989). To address the various needs, there is no one theory or set of techniques that can apply to the whole spectrum of problems brought to therapy (Madanes, 1990). The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy recognizes the utilization of many strategies; one of the more frequent choices during therapy is the

use of metaphors (Bryant, Katz, Becvar, and Becvar, 1988).

METAPHORS IN SCHOOLS

Collaboration With Other Techniques

Metaphors are easily adapted and extremely effective for use in schools (Gareth, 1986; Siltanen, 1986). As previously stated, a counselor needs a variety of counseling techniques to address the spectrum of problems, and metaphors can be used effectively with other techniques to better address a wide array of issues.

Prior to the utilization of other counseling methods, metaphors provide a base from which other techniques can build to more holistically assist the child. In developing a foundation for further growth, metaphors are an extremely effective tool (Morgan and O'Neil 1986). The utilization of metaphors provides the counselor with the means to focus the client's attention and to open him or her to possible patterns of change to

promote continued growth and discovery (Baruth and

Huber, 1985).

Children With Special Needs

Because of adaptability with a variety of children

with special needs, the use of metaphors is also an

important tool in the schools. Metaphors offer children

a more objective viewpoint of the situation and also

help them find alternative ways of fitting into their

culture, in order to form their own networks (Reed,

1989).

Parents and School Staff

When working with teachers and parents, a counselor

also finds metaphors useful. For instance, a metaphor

can be used to explain a child's overly exuberant

behavior (i.e., the puppy that jumps on people not

meaning to hurt anyone, but alienating the very person

from whom he or she is seeking friendship). Like the

puppy, the child needs parameters of behavior if he or

she is going to find acceptance from others.

I frequently use metaphors in a school setting as a counseling technique to reframe and normalize situations. One such instance was with fifth-grade twins, Tony and Terry. On the day I saw Tony, both twins had experienced behavior problems, not unusual for them. Though Terry was the more frequent instigator, Tony was a willing accomplice, out of loyalty to his brother. Because Tony was the more approachable, my immediate concern was to help him see where his behavior was leading him.

I asked Tony how he could be of most help if Terry were drowning in deep, turbulent water where he should never have gone swimming. Would he be more apt to save him if he jumped in and tried to swim to him and bring him back or if he threw a life raft? Tony's reply (as I had hoped it would be) was that he would throw a life raft because he could never save him, otherwise he feared he might drown himself, and that would solve nothing. I next asked him if he could force Terry to

take the life raft that he threw to him. He replied,

"No, because I can't force him." Thus began my

counseling session.

Once Tony was able to compare his situation to that

of a rescue procedure involving a possible drowning

victim, he could then process the irrationality of his

approach in helping Terry. By "jumping in" with Terry

and participating in his negative behavior, Tony was

only escalating the situation into a cycle he really did

not want.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This review of the literature concentrates on

metaphors, one of the many tools that can be used by

school counselors to help students achieve positive life

experiences. To assist in a basic understanding of the

counselor's use of metaphors, a definition and examples

of metaphors will be provided. The utilization and

advantages of metaphors will be articulated, and the

relevancy to the school setting will be explained.

DEFINITION OF A METAPHOR

A metaphor is "A figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or an analogy between them" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1986, p. 790). Kopp (1971) describes a metaphor as "A way of speaking or illustrating in which one thing is expressed in terms of another, whereby this bringing together throws new light on the character of what is being described" (p. 17).

WHY METAPHORS ARE USED

Verification of Effectiveness

Reliable and valid research supporting the use of metaphors exists. According to Gordon, 1978; Gordon and Meyers-Anderson, 1981, one of the most frequently used techniques to facilitate the process of change by members of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy is metaphors. Haley (1976), McKim (1972), and Samples (1980) all regard metaphors as a

"creative and effective means of communication and problem solving" (Ishiyama, 1988, p. 153). For determining the problem and its possible solutions, Gladding (1986) regards metaphors as "crucial components" (p. 39). Mills and Crowley (1986) list fourteen different problems with which metaphors were used and found to be a successful tool to promote change. Included in the list were: abusive parent, bedwetting, classroom applications, foster placement situations, hospitalization settings, classroom behavior, emotional problems, school phobias, and thumb sucking. When using metaphors for counseling, Minuchin and Fishman (1981) report a high rate of success with their clients.

Promoting Change

The purpose of counseling is to promote change, and in order for behavior change to occur, cognitive restructuring must take place (Madanes, 1990). The processes necessary for this type of change to occur

include normalizing and reframing. The processes will be subsequently described.

Normalization

Metaphors provide a storyline involving a character experiencing a situation similar to the client's problem. When a client identifies with another individual experiencing a parallel problematic situation, normalization can occur, thus eliminating the isolated focus on the problem. The normalization process alleviates the client's feelings that he or she is alone with the problem and gives the client an opportunity to focus on the solution rather than the problem. Gatti and Coleman (1976) use metaphors as a means to interpret the child's unacceptable behavior as human and comprehensible, thus helping the child to focus on the problem rather than on the feelings of isolation with the problem. "In the therapeutic metaphor, this [focus change] is facilitated by representing the child's problem accurately enough so

that he or she no longer feels alone, yet indirectly

enough so that he or she does not feel embarrassed,

ashamed, or resistant" (Mills and Crowley, 1986, p. 65).

According to Mills and Crowley, once a connection is

made between the child and the story, the child's <u>sense</u>

<u>of isolation</u> about his or her own situation is replaced

with a feeling of <u>shared experience</u>.

<u>Reframing</u>

Personal metaphors provide a mechanism for

accessing individuals' frameworks (Bryant, Katz, Becvar,

Becvar, 1988). Through personal metaphors a client's

point of reference will shift, which allows the client

to deal with the problem from a different perspective.

Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) state that

Erickson's utilization of metaphors caused positive

change because new behavioral alternatives become

available with new perceptions of old situations. When

clients can disassociate from the immediate problem and

are able to examine from a point of detachment, they

will be able to more analytically examine their

situation. Gordon (1961) noted that metaphors help

clients see, hear, and feel more clearly and

consequently generate different ways of viewing the

situation. "A change in perception is often the

beginning of a change in thinking, feeling, and

behaving" (Gladding, 1986, p. 39). Counselors using

metaphors help clients achieve goals and clearer

insights than counselors who are unaware of the benefits

of metaphors (Jourard and Landsman, 1980; Lazarus,

1977). Hobbs (1983) thought metaphors generated new

perspectives and inferences that were otherwise

inaccessible in cognitive processing. Metaphors were

found to be significant in generating and processing

thoughts (Hobbs, 1983).

HOW A METAPHOR IS USED

To understand the exact mechanics of how a metaphor

is processed in a client's mind and to understand how

transfer to daily life occurs, Mills and Crowley (1986)

provide a three-step model. At the first level of the Mills and Crowley model, the counselor intrigues the child's conscious mind with the storyline by introducing an interesting plot. On the second level the counselor personalizes the metaphor in accordance with the child's unique personality and life's learning by eliciting positive memories and experiences and by observing and utilizing minimal cues. Then on the third level he or she can begin the process of interspersing whatever therapeutic suggestions are needed by the child (Mills and Crowley, 1986).

On the first level, while the child is absorbed with the story (metaphor), important therapeutic suggestions relating to the problem can be interspersed into the storyline. While personally relating to the story, the child hears the suggestions, but not as direct suggestions to himself or herself. During the second level, subconsciously, the child personalizes the suggestions in a meaningful way.

Mills and Crowley (1986) provide the following
example:

"At the moment a **Twinkle** appeared in the
little elephant's eyes. He realized there was
a time, there is a time, when *it is so
important to be different--when being
different can even be wonderful.*

The older, wiser elephant **nudged** him
gently and said, "That's right. There are
many, many times when *being different is such
a wonderful ability, like all the abilities
you have now.* And I wonder if you are able to
teach some of those abilities, to *share some
of those abilities with the other ones* who may
not understand."

The little pink elephant **thought** and
thought and **thought** with that same twinkle and
said, "Yes, I certainly could!"

He went back to where the other little
elephants **played** and he began to *show them
three other abilities* so that they could
experience them in a new and different way.
He **showed** them how many things he could do by
being pink. And they were **amazed**. Through
sharing, they realized that being pink could
be quite **exciting** and different, and they
really tried **hard** themselves to become pink
(p. 142).

A child struggling with his or her individual

difference would be able to subconsciously identify with

the pink elephant. At the third level, the counselor

would then have access to openly discuss the child's

situation without the child feeling isolated with his or

her problem. For example, if a young child had a

musical talent which required many hours of practice

and his classmates teased him or her about the

requirements and uniqueness of such a talent, he or she

may feel resentful and isolated. The counselor would

lead the child to see the similarities of his or her

situation to that of the pink elephant. Like the pink

elephant at the beginning of the story, the child feels

alone and unrespected because of the uniqueness of the

talent. The pink elephant realized that his uniqueness

offered him the opportunity to share with others, and

the very act of doing so made his gift something he

would not want to be without. If the elephant had tried

to hide his pinkness, he would have been denied the

opportunity to share his uniqueness with others.

EXAMPLES OF METAPHORS

Illustrated in this section are example metaphors

to address common concerns of students: discomfort with

emotional and physical maturation, difficulties in

personal relationships, and resistance to counseling.

Concluding the section is an example of a client-centered metaphor.

Metaphor: Discomforts of Growth

The process of change and discomfort of growth is illustrated in the following metaphor (Bryant, Katz, Becvar, and Becvar, 1988):

> "As a crab outgrows its shell, that covering is discarded. During the time that it is growing a new shell, it is much more vulnerable. We, as individuals, undergo similar changes as we grow interpersonally as well as interpersonally within relationships. As we discard familiar, but outmoded behaviors and attitudes we feel more vulnerable. It is only after we have grown into new behavioral patterns, that we feel safe enough to venture out into new territory and relationships." (Bryant, Katz, Becvar, and Becvar, 1988, p. 116).

The counselor would then have an avenue to discuss whether the crab could experience growth without vulnerability. Possible process question: Is it rational to expect a change without risk? To address a low frustration tolerance: Can you stand to be

uncomfortable for a period of time to achieve a more

desired result?

Metaphor: Relationships

As children mature, their relationships with people

become more complex. Unhealthy situations can develop

involving a child who sacrifices too much personally for

a relationship involving friends or family. Following

is a possible metaphor to use when a child complains

that after numerous gestures of kindness to a friend,

the friend does not return the favors. Bryant, Katz,

Becvar, and Becvar (1988) provide this example by

Michael Brinks as it relates to the challenges of

relationships.

> The Rat and the Elephant
> "Ahoy there, Elephant," shouted the Rat
> from the scuffy fringe of the bony trail,
> "won't you place me upon your sturdy back and
> parade me a distance?"
> "Why, certainly, Rat." And with a sweep
> of his snaky trunk, Elephant gently
> accommodated the tiny creature between his
> massive shoulders.
> "Comfy, Rat?" inquired the peaceful giant.
> "Comfy, Elephant, very comfy indeed.
> Except... (and Rat paused ever so carefully

before continuing) perhaps some stems of straw
and wisps of cotton would gentle your ride."

Moments later found Elephant foraging
through nooks and crannies of underbrush and
thickets harvesting stems of straw and wisps
of cotton to gentle his ride for Rat.

"Comfy, Rat?" inquired the peaceful giant.

"Comfy, Elephant, very comfy indeed...
(and Rat paused ever so carefully before
continuing) my throat is so parched from this
dusty trail that I am afraid that only the
coolest of water from yon spring would ease my
thirst."

Moments later found Elephant bathing and
quenching Rat with cool, refreshing water from
the precious spring.

"Comfy, Rat?" Elephant again inquired.

"Comfy, Elephant," Rat in turn replied,
"yet a grumbling in my tummy warns me of my
present need for grain from yon field."

Moments later found Elephant thrashing
stocks with his dexterous trunk and nourishing
Rat with scrumptious pellets.

"Comfy, Rat?" Elephant again inquired.

"Comfy, Elephant," Rat replied, "yet from
my towering loft I see the trail's end. Would
you not carry me the distance?"

With Elephant's great strides, the pair
easily reached trail's end by twilight.

"I've surely enjoyed myself today," spoke
Rat to Elephant, "and I eagerly look forward
to our meeting tomorrow."

The great beast gently lowered Rat to the
round and the two parted company for the
evening.

What a price for companionship (p. 118).

Without telling the client that he or she is
tolerating unusual and unnecessary demands in a
relationship, Brink conveys the message in a non-
threatening, non-judgmental metaphor. In talking to the
student, the counselor would focus on the one-way
relationship in the above metaphor. Obviously, the
student is not satisfied with the relationship, so he or
she should be guided to see that by continuing the
cycle, the preferred changes probably would not occur.

Metaphor: Resistant Client

Resistance to counseling from students with
difficulties is a very common obstacle that school
counselors encounter. By involving the student's
language and interests, a counselor can assist the
student in lessening his or her resistance (Combs and
Freedman, 1990). Interweaving a student's interests
with rich language will help relax the student so that
effective counseling can be possible. Mills and Crowley

give an example of a child whose favorite experience

involves a beach:

>   As you are *sitting* there, making yourself
>   *comfortable*, I am going to *tell* you a story
>   and *talk* to you in a way that may help you *see*
>   some pleasant *images* and *memories* from your
>   past.
>   I remember a child *playing* in the sand at
>   a beach and *digging* a hole near the water's
>   edge. She built a sand wall out of wet sand
>   and then *designed it by looking* for seashells,
>   seaweed, old wooden pieces and even stray
>   feathers. I *enjoyed watching* it coming
>   together. As the *sound of the waves*
>   continued, she would *look up* every so often to
>   *watch* them *crash*. Then she would even forget
>   the *rhythm* of the *sounds of the waves* in the
>   background, because she enjoyed *seeing* all her
>   work *developing* into such a beautiful castle
>   (p. 141).

The student lets down his or her guard during this

process of interspersing suggestions and interweaving

sensory systems with the unfolding of the storyline

(Mills and Crowley, 1986). With the less resistant

student, the counselor would then have the opportunity

to utilize a different counseling technique that would

more directly help the student deal with the problem.

Metaphor: Client Behavior as Foundation

Some metaphors are created by the counselor, while others are created with the client as the foundation for the metaphor. Milton Erickson and Mills and Crowley (1986) found some of the most effective metaphors to originate from the client (Gladding, 1986). The strategy includes allowing clients to create their own metaphors and find their own solutions, and the counselor only provides the metaphorical theme that represents the current situation (Madanes, 1990).

Erickson utilized a child's behavior in a metaphor. When a six year old child was brought in for a serious thumb-sucking problem, he regarded the child with the same respect he would an adult (Rossi, Ryan and Sharp, 1983):

> Now let us get one thing straight. That left thumb of yours is your thumb; that mouth of yours is your mouth; those front teeth of yours are your front teeth. I think you are entitled to do anything you want to with your thumb, with your mouth, and with your teeth (p. 263).

After providing the foundation of responsibility,

he then metaphorically gave the fingers personalities

and each needed a turn.

> One of the first things you learned when you
> went to nursery school was to take turns. You
> took turns with this little girl and with that
> little boy in doing things in nursery
> school... You learned to take turns at home.
> When Mother serves food, she serves it first
> to one brother, and then it may be your turn,
> then it may be sister's turn, then it is
> Mother's turn. We always do things by turns.
> But I don't think you are being right or fair
> or good in always sucking your left thumb and
> never giving your right thumb a turn... The
> first finger hasn't had a turn; not a single
> other finger has had a turn... I think you
> really would like to give each of your fingers
> a proper turn (p. 263).

By combining the paradox of the child's sense of

fair behavior with the metaphor of the fingers having

personalities, Erickson was affecting the child's

subconscious. In this case, the child tired of sucking

all his fingers and finally quit sucking his thumb.

CONCLUSION

Counselors are being hired in schools where once

there was no such position. As the walls of Eastern

Europe fell, so have many of the walls camouflaging the difficult problems with which children are dealing in the 1990's. To address such problems, schools need counselors with a repertoire of eclectic techniques. Often normalizing and reframing must occur before progress can be made with other counseling techniques. Metaphor is one such approach; it is not a cure-all. It is simply one approach among many that can and should be used to help students cope with their problems and anxieties.

McDowell, Bills and Eaton (1989) summarize by writing "through rapport and respect of clients' unique maps, and using specific interventions such as... the metaphor, the counselor can aid clients through problematic situations and help create the opportunity to develop their abilities to achieve quality life experiences" (p. 154).

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