Metaphorical cards as an effective projective tool in the process of supervision and coaching

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of the use of illustrated metaphorical cards as a projective technique to enrich the supervision and coaching process. To this end, the general meaning of metaphors and the factors influencing their use in the counselling process are first highlighted. Thereafter, the article will outline the benefits of using metaphorical cards for both the supervisor and coach and the client, and the challenges and some important observations for working with metaphorical cards. At the end the author shares her own experiences with the use of metaphorical cards.

Introduction – metaphors in counselling

Metaphor is from the Greek word metaphora meaning a transfer. Individually, meta means along with, beyond, while phore means thing or part bearing (Merriam-Webster dictionary). "The metaphor is about treating one thing as something else, and its primary task is to facilitate understanding", write Lakoff and Johnson (2011: 69).

We use metaphors in our speech daily, and most of us do not realize the fact that these expressions are metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 2011). Metaphor arises from the creative interaction of language/ thought. Metaphorical processes are seen as automatic and inevitable, and as such can operate independently at a deep level, allowing for great change. "Metaphor can become an incredibly powerful transformative device" as pointed out by Ferrari (2020: 301), that can contribute to positive outcomes in a counselling session. Metaphors help expand the imagination to recognize new possibilities and allow the client to tell his/ her story more easily (Cf. Legowski & Brownlee, 2001).

Working with metaphors is more effective when shared and mutually contributed by both counsellor and client (Cf. Ferrari, 2020), which first requires the counsellor to notice metaphors. According to Ferrari (2020), once the client has come into contact with metaphors and in communication with the counsellor, the metaphor can become new areas of experi-

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ence during personal exploration. These, in turn, can be expressed in new projections of the client's self in his/ her own present and future perception. „The creation of a metaphor affords the possibility of a metaphorical dialogue between the person and the problem, an arena in which negotiations could take place, so to speak" (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001: 26). Through the metaphors created jointly by the client and the counsellor, it is possible to better access the client's experience and this, in turn, promotes positive changes in the counselling process (See Wagener, 2017).

A projective method – metaphorical cards

Projective techniques date back to the beginning of the 20th century, and, above all, they aimed to study personality disorders and what are the factors that prevent a person from "moving forward" (Cf. Cohen et al, 2015). A valued projective method that has become accepted in recent years in psychotherapy is the use of metaphorical techniques (See Kopp, 2015), such as metaphorical cards. Metaphorical cards (also used: therapeutic, associative, projective, metaphor cards) – consist of illustrated images depicting situations and events from different walks of life in which there are no fixed/ specific interpretations and/ or values (Cf. Ayalon & Siso-Ayalon, 2011; Popova & Miloradova, 2014) and provoking the use of metaphors in conversation. The goal of these cards is to recreate a story using a person's imagination (Cohen et al, 2015).

"The cards work as a consulting tool precisely because patterns of the personality's functioning associated with the experience of its surrounding reality and, above all, its relations with the social environment, become obvious in the process of counselling", write Popova and Miloradova (2014: 2). Ayalon's (2007) argues that metaphorical cards stimulate the imagination as they symbolize previous (traumatic) events.

Benefits of using metaphorical cards

Pictures and images tell us more than ideas put into words

because for communicating in the visual language and understanding it, people already have developmental benefits. While looking at the pictures, we can quickly contact our emotions and topics. An image may contain a huge number of elements that speak to people in different ways. As they say, that one picture can say more than a thousand words (Saard, 2024).

Using metaphorical cards:

- might "lead to awareness of repressed information, changing of emotional states, and reassessment of goals" (Cf. Popova & Miloradova, 2014).
- allows internal representations of the world through creativity, imagination, and flexibility (Popova & Miloradova, 2014).
- enables access to deeper levels of emotion (Cf. Ayalon, 2003).
- can also "help trigger processes of trust, bonding, and safe communication between the therapist and client". And the client is the one who provides the interpretation of the metaphorical element (Cf. Ayalon & Siso-Ayalon, 2011).

Metaphorical cards can be considered as one of the effective intervention tools for the supervision and coaching process. They provide an excellent opportunity to address a variety of topics and intensify work with clients, at the individual and team, as well as organizational levels (Saard, 2024).

Metaphorical cards help the client to see their own story laid out in front of them, to take a certain distance from themselves and the subject, and to look at it from a perspective, that may in turn bring out new nuances and knowledge about the topic. At the same time, the counselling skills of the supervisor or coach are very important. For example, it may happen that the client quickly chooses a metaphorical card for a task that is related to their topic, feeling, etc. and shares only a few words about it – this may be a sign that they are "not in touch" with themselves or aware of a sensitive topic. In such a case, it is important to "bring the client safely back" to the chosen card for further investigation at the first possible moment. Of course, as with any technique in the counselling process, if the client is afraid or unwilling to work with metaphorical cards, they have the right to say no. As Legowski and Brownlee (2001: 26) point out: "furthermore, this method of generating metaphors depends on the client's willingness and ability to use imagination. Not all people want to participate".

Metaphorical cards are not only useful for the supervisors and coaches but for the client as well. Table 1, which prepared by the author, provides some examples.

Table 1. Benefits of metaphorical cards for the supervisor, coach, and client (Saard; based on: Karnieli-Miller et al, 2017; Cirillo & Crider, 1995; Lyddon, Clay & Sparks, 2001).

It helps the supervisor, the coach...	**It helps the client...**
• promote a deeper experience and contact. • collect information about the client's values, experiences, and interpretations. • ask supplementary (metaphorical) questions. • process more information and get to the "core" faster. • approach the meeting creatively, etc.	• express feelings, beliefs, and values. • move to deeper levels of experience. • recall repressed experiences. • release blocked feelings. • in verbal self-expression. • talk about sensitive topics in a safe way. • bring out different perspectives. • get more clarity about his/her experience and story. • facilitate sharing of his/her story, etc.

The use of metaphors, stories, images, and similar expressive media, whether in the therapeutic or the supervision process, assumes that a story or image can represent the objective or subjective perception of internal or external reality. Relating to the representative image is likely to change internal reality or can bring about a change in perceiving the external reality, but it does not aspire to achieve change in the objective reality itself. (See Lahad, 2000)

Ayalon and Siso-Ayalon (2011: 3) bring out beautifully: "the metaphorical cards help create a "safe space", in which a client feels free to move safely from areas of pain to areas of healing in a relatively short period. This space can be a concrete or an imaginary one. It can be located indoors (in a castle or a cave) or outdoors (in a jungle, forest, or sunflower field). Clients may choose to be themselves or play one of many varied roles, such as realistic roles, desired roles, imaginary roles, etc". With the right use, it is possible to identify coping strategies and develop new ones (Cf. Ayalon, 2003).

Challenges of using metaphorical cards

As with any technique, the use of metaphorical cards can present several hazards and challenges, especially in the case of incompetence and ignorance. Here are some examples (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017: 148-149):

- the use of metaphorical cards "can include interference with the train of thought, allowing associated and mystical speech and thinking, and talking in slogans".
- the use of metaphorical cards might not influence the client's ability to share information and hence seems unhelpful, as writing.
- in case of incompetence the cards might fly themselves to broad interpretations, leading clients to discuss issues not relevant to the counselling topic.
- metaphorical cards might "activate associations in participants` minds (e.g., with traumatic experiences), which might negatively affect their well-being".
- working with metaphorical cards can be a burden for both parties: it can be difficult for clients to choose an appropriate card and share his/ her story based on it, and the counsellor can feel time pressured.

Thus, the use of metaphorical cards, like any other technique or approach, is not self-evident. Certain basic facts are important, and they serve to prevent harming the client. One important observation in the work with metaphorical cards is that the supervisor and/ or coach does not create nor interpret the images, but merely asks questions to develop the metaphor and the story. "If the therapist interprets the images or suggests images, the meaning of the metaphor may be misconstrued since a metaphor can have a multiplicity of meanings", write Legowski & Brownlee (2001: 27).

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By creating their own metaphors, clients are using their own resources in storying, reframing, and solving their problems. This is an empowering process since it depends on the clients' weaving of their own images from the past, present and into the future. "Since the interpretations of metaphors featured in the cards are completely in the eye of the beholder, the same card can trigger different reactions in different participants" (Ayalon & Siso-Ayalon, 2011). Popova and Miloradova (2014: 2) add that "due to the selectivity of perception, apperception, and projection effects, the client sees in the picture of the card exactly what fits his experiences, related to current life situations and outlooks on life, past experience, and personal injury".

These are again good examples of how powerful tools metaphorical cards are in counselling. At the same time, it should

not be forgotten that metaphorical cards alone do not do the job. The fundamentals of counselling and the ability to use metaphorical cards purposefully and with great expertise and caution are still important.

Experience of the author of the article

To this day, I've had ten years of experience in using metaphorical cards, and every year I notice how powerful this tool is. In 2015, I developed my first deck of metaphorical cards. However, it grew into a series of metaphorical cards. There are currently five different decks of cards and a sixth is being developed.

As mentioned before, metaphorical cards encourage the use of metaphors. It can be a key that opens many doors that the client may not be aware of and entering through the door can lead to a "real theme", gradually and carefully (*did you notice the metaphors here?*). However, most counselling (including supervision and coaching) is limited to working on icebreaking and feelings – in fact, the potential of using metaphorical cards is much more than that.

Metaphorical cards are not necessarily for dealing with the so-called serious topics (such as deep feelings, traumas, crises, etc.). They can be used, for example, in work with relationships, goals, roles and values, etc. At this year's ANSE Summer University in Budapest, I conducted a workshop "Values that sustain and support", where I used both metaphorical and value verbal cards from the Contemplation series and combined them with drawing (see pictures). The majority of the work was individual, and part of the group already touched a deeper level. This is just one small example of how different metaphorical cards can be used.

Often what I have encountered in my practice is that many clients jokingly ask if we are going to predict. This is because they lack information about metaphorical cards. As with any other approach, in the work with metaphorical cards, it is important to clarify the purpose of its use and, if necessary, the difference between prediction and metaphorical cards. In addition, when working with metaphorical cards, there is no clearly defined sequence of actions, questions to ask, etc. Moreover, there is no correlation between a particular problem and a metaphorical card.

My main tool as a supervisor and coach (combined, of course, with other techniques and consulting approaches) is metaphorical cards. In recent years, I have been sharing my knowledge and practical experience with psychologists, supervisors, coaches, and other professionals who work with people. I always mentioned that the selection of metaphorical cards in the world is wide. One possible approach can be developed further, and new components can be added – all based on the clients, their stories, cooperation, and their own creativity, etc. The most important is that the counsellors themselves "like" them and find them suitable for work. Metaphorical cards have a wide range of uses.

In conclusion, metaphorical cards can be used on any topic and combined with different methods – there are endless possibilities here, and that is why it is such a powerful tool! ■

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