Metaphors and client change in counselling

TOM STRONG

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta, Canada

Abstract. Counseling is a primarily verbal activity where it can often be difficult to differentiate the literal from the metaphorical in clients' communications. Acceptance of metaphor as a genuine form of clients' experience and communication could provide counselors with a viable medium for effecting change. Understanding our clients' metaphors, utilizing their metaphors for change, or constructing and presenting our own therapeutic metaphors requires learning certain skills and awarenesses. After a brief theoretical examination of metaphors and metaphoric processing, this article outlines skills and considerations for recognizing, using, creating, and delivering effective metaphors in counseling.

What are metaphors?

The most basic way of understanding metaphor is as an indirect form of expression. In some cases metaphors are used intentionally, such as in the use of cliches, poetic language, or proverbs. The metaphors of greatest significance to counselors are those which are expressed without such consciousness. It is because these metaphors are, "windows into people's phenomenological worlds" (Brooks, 1985), that they have important implications for understanding the contexts of our clients' problems and the possible solution strategies for ameliorating them.

Non-intentional metaphors have been termed 'outcroppings of the unconscious' (Arlow, 1979), 'private logic' (Adler, 1973), 'neurotic poetry' (Perls et al., 1951), and 'right brain language' synonymous with unconsciously produced or intuitive expressions (Watzlawick, 1978). Arlow (1979), a psychoanalyst, viewed metaphors as an unconscious attempt to conceptually distance oneself from powerful-potentially overwhelming affective experiences. One can recognize this attempt in indirect communication between people around difficult subjects. These unconscious metaphors can be fragments of experience or reflective of an individual's overall life approach. Adler's (1973) 'lifestyle' or Kuhn's (1962) 'scientific paradigms' are analogous to this latter type of metaphor. Consistent with this type of metaphor would be the actions of an individual who not only selectively organizes and represents experience, but sets goals, takes actions, and correspondingly attends to experience (largely in an uncon-
scious manner) in accordance with the existing nature of the ‘lifestyle’ or ‘paradigm’—much like a non-objective scientist. When one’s understanding of experience and rationale for action is generalized, distorted, and deleted to fit the metaphor(s) used, a tautology of thought and deed akin to the self-fulfilling prophecy results. People not only reveal their metaphors verbally, but ‘model’ them non-verbally in their body language and posture, vocal intonations, choices of activity, writing styles, penmanship, manner of dress, ‘choice’ of psychosomatic symptoms, etc. One recent definition of metaphor comes fairly close to summanzing what has been stated so far.

Metaphors are a habitual organization of action, fantasy, and language behaviors which follow developmental principles in representing past experiences, while also construing present situations and prescribing present behavior to deal with them (Santostefano, 1985, p 127)

Metaphoric processing

Responding to and understanding metaphors, as with responding to any sensory data, involves a process of relating the metaphor, with all its related contextual information (the ‘nature’ of the communicator, the ‘nature’ of the communication of which it is a part, the ‘nature’ of the communication environment, etc) to existing similar or related internal experiences of the perceiver. For most specific and literal language, this process is fairly automatic, but for novel or ambiguous information (such as client metaphors) extra effort appears necessary. Ortony and his colleagues (1978) referred to these metaphors as ‘tension-resolvable contextual anomalies’.

If these metaphors are, as Watzlawick (1978) claimed, right brain language, then they will likely frustrate the rational left brain attempts to provide meanings. Bandler and Grinder (1975) wrote of the ‘transderivational search’ that people make from their sensorily (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory) correlated experience in order to find meaning in others’ communications. When this search fails because of a metaphor’s novelty or anomalies, the metaphor seems to have gestalt-evoking qualities that cognitively compel the individual to create personally appropriate new meaning. People seem incapable of leaving relevant experience as non-understandable, so they construct a satisfactory explanation for it. This process of construction is viewed by many psychologists as right brain activity. It is this process that counsellors will want to evoke in utilizing metaphors for client change.