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## HOW DO PSYCHOTHERAPISTS DESCRIBE THEIR WORK? A STUDY OF METAPHORS FOR THE THERAPY PROCESS

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Thirty practicing psychotherapists participated in an anonymous survey of metaphors describing the process of psychotherapy. Subjects were asked to rate 16 metaphors drawn from theoretical works (e.g., therapy as "teaching," "war," "parenting," "science"). In addition, subjects were asked to generate their own idiosyncratic metaphors, and professional background characteristics were obtained. The major goals were to study: (1) whether therapists possess metaphors for their work; (2) whether metaphors would cluster into larger meaning systems (via factor analysis); and (3) whether endorsement of metaphors could be explained as a function of therapist professional characteristics. Results indicate support for the first two questions, but not the third. An additional finding was that therapists' idiosyncratic metaphors were endorsed at a higher level than were those provided on the survey.

Psychotherapists who have written about their work provide a wide range of metaphors to describe the task of conducting psychotherapy, including therapy as "war," "art," "parenting," "teaching," and "detective work" among others (Burton, 1972; Carkhuff, 1967; Freud, 1915; Kottler, 1986; Reik, 1956). This topic has received no known attention, however, in empirical research.

The term "metaphor" can be defined as a figure of speech "in which a term is transferred from the object it ordinarily designates to an object it may designate only by implicit comparison" (Morris, 1975). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state, "the essence of metaphor is understanding one kind of thing of experience in terms of another." Recently, there has been a "renaissance" of interest across professional disciplines in metaphors (Berlin, Olson, Cano, & Engel, 1991). Metaphors may represent a means of expressing thoughts which otherwise might not be able to be articulated, may reflect problem-solving capabilities (Bourne, Dominowski, Loftus, & Healy, 1986; Gick & Holyoak, 1980), may structure perception, and may determine one's emotional attitudes toward a task and towards other people (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to Berlin et al. (1991), "Therapists who understand the

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organizing role of metaphors in their daily work will be more attuned to ways in which metaphors they use highlight certain therapeutic issues and obscure others" (p. 361).

The study of therapists' metaphors for their work is also suggested by increasing attempts to understand more about differences between particular therapists, even of the same theoretical orientation, training, and experience level (Luborsky et al., 1986; Strupp, 1986). A survey of 279 members of the Psychotherapy Division of the American Psychological Association indicated that the single most important problem perceived with clinical research was, "Treating all therapists or all responses by therapists as interchangeable" (75% endorsement; Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986). The study of therapists' metaphors may have implications for understanding differences in therapist performance, job satisfaction, motivation, and stress (cf. Landy, 1985).

In this paper, an anonymous survey will be used to determine therapists' endorsement of metaphors found in a literature review of clinicians' writings about their work. All of the metaphors refer to a brief description of the therapy process by association to some other task or process. Metaphors were derived from clinical writings by therapists (Burton, 1972; Carkhuff, 1967; Freud, 1915; Kottler, 1986; Reik, 1956), and from discussion with practicing therapists. It is hypothesized that: (1) therapists will differ in the metaphors which they endorse; (2) certain metaphors will tend to cluster together into larger meaning systems (via factor analysis); and (3) therapists' endorsement of metaphors may be associated with professional background characteristics.

## METHOD

The survey was distributed to four clinical settings (two outpatient psychotherapy clinics, a medical center outpatient clinic, and a university clinical psychology training program). Thirty subjects volunteered to complete the survey, with two additional subjects excluded because they were not practicing clinicians. Respondents were asked to endorse, on a 1 (least) to 5 (most) scale, each of 16 metaphors for therapy, to circle their favorite metaphor, and to provide any additional metaphors of their own which they use. Professional background data were also obtained. Two versions of the survey were used to ascertain order effects (one version having the reverse order of presentation of metaphors from the other version). All responses were anonymous.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### SAMPLE AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Subjects were either from the field of psychology (25 subjects) or social work (4). Most were professionals (22) rather than advanced graduate students (7). Theoretical orientations represented include eclectic (12), cognitive-behavioral (10), psychodynamic (4), systems theory (2), and humanistic (1). Most therapists worked in an institutional setting (12) versus private practice (7), or both (7). Most reported serving a predominantly middle class clientele (19) rather than lower class (2) or a mix (6). The majority conduct individual therapy (21), adult therapy (20),

and outpatient therapy (23). Average number of hours per week currently spent in direct patient contact was 16.8. Average number of years experience as a clinician was 5.93, with a range of 19 (a year defined as approximately 20 hours per week of direct patient contact). (Note: Some demographic questions were not answered by all respondents.)

#### ORDER EFFECTS

Only one correlation beyond chance level was found as a function of the order of metaphors presented on the survey. This suggests that further results are not explainable due to order effects.

#### METAPHORS ENDORSED

Means, standard deviations, and ranges of endorsement of each metaphor by the full sample are provided in Table 1. From these data (organized from most to least endorsed), it is clear that there was considerable variability in therapists' preferred metaphors for their work. This is indicated both by mean differences (ranging from 3.60 to 1.27) and by the sometimes wide ranges and standard deviations obtained. Asterisks have been used to mark those metaphors which received the widest ranges of endorsement (5 points on the 5-point scale), and which thus suggest the greatest disagreement.

#### UNDERLYING MEANING SYSTEMS

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine potential factors by which metaphors could be grouped into larger meaning systems. Both an oblique and an orthogonal analysis were run using principal components extraction. Since results were virtually identical, only the oblique is reported here. A five-factor

**Table 1. Rank Ordering of Metaphors (by Mean Rating)**

Metaphor	Mean	SD	Range <sup>a</sup>
Art	3.60	1.19	5.0*
Teaching	3.60	.79	4.5
Healing	3.33	1.09	5.0*
Science	3.32	1.00	5.0*
Detective work	3.10	.38	4.5
Parenting	2.91	.92	4.0
Technical procedure	2.57	.89	4.5
Spiritual quest	2.35	1.13	5.0*
Philosophical dialogue	2.13	.67	4.0
Acting	2.03	.99	4.0
Sales	2.03	.94	3.0
Hard labor	1.88	.86	4.0
Writing a novel	1.57	.83	4.0
Playing a game	1.48	.73	4.0
War	1.30	.52	3.0
Handling wastes	1.27	.63	3.5

<sup>a</sup>Asterisks denote the metaphors for which there were greatest disagreement.

**Table 2. Underlying Meaning System of the Metaphors (Factor Analysis)**

Factor	Metaphors	Factor loadings (per factor) <sup>a</sup>				
		1	2	3	4	5
Task-oriented, professional	Teaching	.77				
	Acting	.75				
	Sales	.67				
	Technical	.59				
	Science	.59				
	Detective work	.54				-.51
Primal, fantasy	Spiritual quest	.74				
	War	.69				
	Play	.62				
	Handling wastes	.50				
Taking responsibility	Hard labor			.86		
	Parenting			.62		
Healing arts	Art				-.83	
	Healing				-.75	
Intellectual	Writing a novel					-.78
	Philosophical dialogue					.70

<sup>a</sup>All factor loadings .50 or greater are listed.

solution was chosen, and accounts for 64% of the variance across all metaphors. The analysis reveals five quite clear-cut factors, which have been labeled as follows (with percentage of the total variance explained by each factor shown in parentheses): (1) *task-oriented, professional*, comprised of "teaching," "acting," "sales," "technical work," "science," and "detective work" (18.5%); *primal, fantasy*, from "spiritual quest," "war," "play," "handling wastes" (14.3%); *taking responsibility*, with "hard labor," "parenting" (11.9%); *healing arts*, comprised of "art," "healing" (10.2%); and *intellectual*, based on "writing a novel," "philosophical dialogue" (9.1%). These factors appear to represent qualitatively different ways in which therapists approach their work. Intercorrelations between all factors was very low (ranging  $r = .01$  to  $r = -.13$ ), indicating that the factors are independent of each other. The results and factor labels, however, are tentative due to the low sample size and lack of replication on other samples. Moreover, the negative factor loadings on some factors (e.g., 4 and 5) should suggest cautious interpretation, perhaps indicating that therapists show strong responses to these domains which may be negative as well as positive.

#### IDIOSYNCRATIC METAPHORS

Therapists were also able to provide metaphors of their own. Specifically, they offered the following (with ratings in parentheses): "Honesty," "Process," "Focusing total attention on another person," "Explorer/guide," "Just a job" (all rated 5); "Voyage together," "Apprenticeship" (rated 4.5); "Conducting an orchestra,"

"Dreamwork" (rated 4); "Magic," "Meditation," "Suspending time," "Intuition" (rated 3). It is noteworthy that therapists' idiosyncratic metaphors were endorsed more than were those provided on the survey. That is, of the 30 subjects, 11 (36.6%) rated their own idiosyncratic metaphor as their "favorite." No metaphor from the survey itself reached such a high level of favored status, suggesting that therapists' unique conceptualizations may be highly important to them. Such idiosyncratic metaphors may also provide a heuristic for further research. Two themes, for example, which appear in the idiosyncratic metaphors are alteration of consciousness (e.g., meditation, dreamwork, suspending time, intuition) and travel (voyage, explorer).

#### RELATIONSHIP OF PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS TO ENDORSEMENT OF METAPHORS

An attempt was made to determine whether endorsement of particular metaphors was a function of professional characteristics (training discipline, professional level, years experience, theoretical orientation, consistency of practice of the theoretical orientation, satisfaction with career as a therapist, private vs. institutional setting, client socioeconomic status, individual vs. other modality, child vs. adult clientele, inpatient vs. outpatient setting, weekly hours patient contact, and predominance of diagnostic categories). Correlations were used for two-level professional characteristics, ANOVAS for three or greater levels. For both types of analyses, the number of significant findings was not above the level expected by chance, and are thus not reported here. This suggests that endorsement of metaphors, at least in this sample, is independent of professional characteristics. It is also noteworthy that the sample was relatively "typical" of practicing therapists in terms of clinical demographics, and thus these results may be predicted to generalize fairly well to the population of practicing clinicians.

#### DISCUSSION

It would be important to validate this work on a larger and more comprehensive sample. It is also unclear whether therapists are interpreting metaphors in the same way; a more in-depth study would be required to rule out the hypothesis that therapists may mean quite different things by the same metaphor. Indeed, it may be helpful in future studies to provide therapists with more extensive descriptions of each metaphor, rather than the single phrases used in this study. Further, it is unclear to what extent response biases may be present, such as the desire to "look good" by endorsing mainly positive metaphors, for example. Finally, the relationship between therapists' metaphors and their in-session behavior is yet to be determined.

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