

## The Intentional Use of Metaphor in Counseling Supervision

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### **Abstract:**

In this multiple case study, the intentional use of metaphor in supervision was examined to determine its impact on (1) supervisees' recall of supervision events, (2) supervisees' perceptions of the effectiveness of supervision, and (3) supervisees' ability to conceptualize clinical situations.

**Keywords:** Supervision, metaphor, counselor training

### **Article:**

Over the last decade, writers and theorists in counselor training and supervision (Borders, 1989; Fuqua, Johnson, Anderson, & Newman, 1984; Kurpius, Benjamin, & Morran, 1985) have stressed that cognitive counseling skills are a major foundation of effective counseling and, thus, must be given attention in counselor preparation. There have been repeated calls for research designed to identify core cognitive counseling skills and methods that help counselors-in-training acquire these skills (Borders, 1989; Fuqua et al., 1984; Kurpius et al., 1985). A clear understanding, however, of exactly what these cognitive counseling skills are remains illusive. Few have attempted to list specific skills and even fewer have sought to describe a complete taxonomy. Those who have offered definitions typically have listed a number of individual skills (Borders & Leddick, 1987). The skills suggested cover quite a range, from counselor self-talk used to manage anxiety and self-instructional strategies to hypothesis formation and multiple perspective taking. Other cognitive counseling skills, including competencies with the counseling process, conceptualization, personalization skills, the ability to understand numerous facts and causes, and the ability to creatively integrate large amounts of information so as to understand the psychological identity of many individuals, all have been discussed as necessary cognitive skills (Morran, Kurpius, Brack, & Brack, 1995).

Although there is considerable diversity in the cognitive skills discussed in the literature, the ability to form accurate client conceptualizations consistently is included, either explicitly or implicitly, as a skill of great importance (Bernard, 1979; Biggs, 1988; Fuqua et al., 1984; Kurpius & Morran, 1988; Morran et al., 1995; Morran, Kurpius, & Brack, 1989). This consistency is notable, as it suggests that case conceptualization is an underlying cognitive skill necessary for effective counselor performance. Case conceptualization, in general, refers to a counselor's ability to formulate an accurate clinical picture of a client from the array of available information.

A central component of the process of developing a case conceptualization involves the formation of clinical hypotheses (Morran et al., 1995). This is not surprising, as a clinical hypothesis results from the integration of relevant information about a client to form a conceptual model of functioning and possible resolutions of difficulties (Morran, Kurpius, Brack, & Rozecki, 1994). The formation of clinical hypotheses is considered a pivotal case conceptualization skill because development of hypotheses involves the counselor's attempt to synthesize all known information about a client into a single theme, which is then used to guide all ensuing counselor behavior. Interestingly, the use of metaphor, which has been widely used in counseling, shares many of the outcomes suggested in the descriptions of cognitive counseling skills above.

Metaphor has been defined in a number of ways, including “an indirect form of expression” (Strong, 1989, p. 203) and “a statement about one thing that resembles something else” (Haley, 1976, p. 65). It is believed that metaphors help clients gain new perspectives on their counseling concerns by generating a wide variety of associations among previously unrelated cognitive structures. As a result of creating new relationships between these structures, clients identify new possibilities for behaving and effecting change in a problem area (Fine, Pollio, & Simpkinson, 1973; Martin, Cummings, & Hallberg, 1992; Strong, 1989).

The use of metaphor as an effective clinical intervention has been examined by a number of researchers (e.g., Harris, Fontana & Dowds, 1977; Keysar, 1989; Martin, Cummings, & Hallberg, 1992), resulting in several important implications of its use. First, metaphor has been suggested as an appropriate means to promote clinical change as it relies on communication at both the conscious and unconscious level. It disrupts “the client’s conscious frame of reference while generating an unconscious search for new or previously blocked meanings or solutions” (Matthews & Dardeck, 1985, p. 12). Therefore, metaphor promotes divergent thinking patterns by assisting clients in the development of alternative conceptualizations of situations in their lives. Second, metaphor is reported to be advantageous as it allows counselors to translate complex information into a relatively simple visual image (Rule, 1983). This imaging offers a catalyst for the development of further insights (Hampden-Turner, 1981). Finally, metaphor has been found to be an effective intervention which clients rate as more helpful and which is associated with client learning and motivation. Martin et al. (1992) found that sessions for which clients could recall a counselor’s statements that included intentionally used metaphor were rated as more helpful overall. In addition, the recall of metaphor was associated with two learning factors, increased emotional awareness and conceptual “bridging.” Also, recall of metaphor was found to be associated with increased motivation by the client. Specifically, enhanced therapeutic relationships and goal clarification were found to be associated with client recall of the therapist’s use of metaphor.

The use of metaphor as a means for the development of counselors’ conceptualization skills has been indicated by at least two writers. Ishiyama (1988) asked counselors-in-training to draw pictures of a case or session with which they were having some difficulty. This metaphorical interpretation was found to be the preferred means of understanding case dynamics by 13 of 19 participants, with only two individuals preferring a non-visual method of case conceptualization and the remainder finding the metaphorical method valuable under some circumstances. Amundson (1988) also suggested the effectiveness of metaphor and drawing as a means of teaching conceptualization skills to counselors-in-training. He gave a case illustration of a counselor working with a 38-year-old female client who was experiencing numerous life stressors associated with being a single mother, having an alcoholic boyfriend, and attending school full-time. The counselor was asked to create a case drawing of the client and the dynamics affecting her life. The drawing, according to Amundson, was used to assist the counselor in understanding better the numerous struggles in her clients’ life. The drawing also provided insight into the counselor’s feelings of helplessness about her client’s many problems and, subsequently, how the counselor might be more effective in her work. Although metaphor has been suggested as an appropriate intervention for use in supervision by these two writers, empirical support for its effectiveness is virtually nonexistent.

In one of the only controlled studies which has sought to examine the impact of metaphor in supervision, Young and Borders (in press) used an analogue design to evaluate the ability of counselors-in-training to develop varied and complete hypotheses after viewing a 9-minute portion of a supervision session. In one analogue the supervisor used a narrative analogy metaphor to discuss with the counselor the clinical difficulties of the case. In the other session the supervisor used direct language to address the counselor’s concerns. Findings of the study were not statistically significant; the researchers suggested this may have been a result of the limited exposure the participants received to the treatment conditions. Subsequently, they called for research in a naturalistic setting that examines the use of metaphor in supervision.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate, in a naturalistic setting, the intentional use of metaphor in counseling supervision as a means of promoting the development of beginning counselors’ cognitive counseling skills. As there has been very little research on the use of metaphor in supervision it seemed

appropriate to conduct an intensive descriptive study. Therefore, a multiple case study approach was used to investigate supervisors' intentional use of metaphor during actual supervision sessions in which supervisors deliberately used metaphors across sessions with specified supervisees and avoided any use of metaphor when working with others.

Consistent with a case study design, multiple measures of variables believed to be associated with the intentional use of metaphor were employed. In line with Martin et al. (1992), the impact that supervisors' use of metaphor had on supervisees' recall of significant supervision events was measured by the post-session recall of most important supervisor statements. In addition, supervisees' ratings of session effectiveness were assessed via the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ), a measure of session depth, smoothness, positivity, and arousal following each supervision session. The measure was used to determine if supervisee's perceptions of supervision sessions would be affected by the supervisor's use of metaphor. Finally, to examine the effect of supervisor-generated metaphor on supervisee's case conceptualization skills, supervisee's clinical hypothesis formation skills were assessed before and after the series of nine supervision sessions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Participants***

The voluntary participants for this case study were two doctoral level supervisors-in-training (1 White male, age 30; 1 White female, age 41) who were students in a CACREP-approved counselor education program at a medium-size, southeastern university, and five second-year master's-level counselors-in-training in the 48-hour master's level counseling program (1 White male, age 29, and 4 White females, ages 22, 43, 26, and 40) at the same university. The doctoral supervisors had completed a course in counseling supervision and were serving as internship supervisors (under supervision) for the first time. The counselors were all first-semester interns in community settings, having completed all core courses in the program and concurrent practicum requirements. Internship requirements dictated that certain procedures were similar across supervisors (e.g., supervisors met weekly with their interns and reviewed a minimum of seven audiotapes of counseling sessions).

### ***Measures***

***Metaphor recall.*** The Episodic Memory Questionnaire (EMQ) (Martin, Cummings, & Hallberg, 1992) was administered to all participants following each individual supervision session as a measure of their recall of the supervisor's intentional use of metaphor. The EMQ is a pencil and paper measure consisting of five questions which prompt the respondent to reflect on the session just completed and recall significant happenings. Specifically, the EMQ asks respondents to identify the two "most memorable events," and then explain why they remember these two events. Trained raters are used to determine that metaphors reported by supervisors did in fact occur in session (by viewing video/audiotapes of sessions) and that metaphors used met the operational definition of a metaphor. Raters then review supervisees' responses on the EMQ to determine if the events recalled as significant were those associated with the supervisor's intentionally used metaphor, resulting in a percentage of metaphors recalled.

On a final EMQ item, respondents rate the helpfulness of the session on a 5-point Likert scale, anchored by 1 (not at all helpful) and 5 (extremely helpful). Supervisors made this rating in response to the question, "How helpful was this session to your supervisee?" while supervisees responded to the question, "How would you rate the helpfulness of this session?"

***Session effectiveness.*** The Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ; Stiles & Snow, 1984) was administered to each supervisee as a measure of perceived depth, smoothness, positivity, and arousal following each supervision session. The SEQ consists of 24 pairs of adjectives which the respondent rates on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = shallow to 7 = deep) regarding their feelings immediately following a session. The SEQ has been shown to demonstrate high reliability, with coefficient alphas ranging from .78 to .93. The instrument is scored by totaling for the Likert ratings for items on each of the four subscales.

*Client conceptualization.* As a pre/post measure of the counselors' ability to conceptualize client problems, the Clinical Assessment Questionnaire (CAQ; Holloway & Wolleat, 1980) was administered. The CAQ is a pencil and paper version of Watson's (1976) interview format for measuring clinical hypothesis formation. The CAQ consists of five written tasks which direct the respondent in the forming and substantiating, based on client data, of two hypothesis describing the client's problem. The CAQ is scored for the presence or absence of six categories of information, including elements of understanding the client, time frames used in understanding the client, categories of information used to support conclusions, number of instances used to support conclusions, categories of information sought, and number of divergent questions asked. In this study, the CAQ was completed based on 7 minutes of videotape of an actual counseling session in which a female client discussed career and marital issues with a female counselor.

### **Procedures**

*Data collection.* All potential participants were contacted just before the beginning of the semester and invited to participate. Those who volunteered, signed informed consent forms; counselor volunteers were randomly assigned (by gender) to two groups: those who received intentional metaphor in supervision sessions and those who did not. The male supervisor worked with three supervisees, intentionally using metaphor with two (1 male and 1 female) and avoiding the use of metaphor with the other (a female). The female supervisee worked with two female supervisees intentionally using metaphor with one supervisee and avoided the use metaphor with the other. Supervisors met with their supervisees for a total of nine individual sessions, all of which were videotaped for coding following completion of the data collection.

Both the SEQ (Stiles & Snow, 1984) and EMQ (Martin et al., 1992) were completed by each counselor-in-training and supervisor immediately following each individual supervision session. The completed instruments were sealed in a separate coded envelope by each respondent and held by a research assistant until the completion of all data collection.

The CAQ (Holloway & Wolleat, 1980) was administered to each counselor-in-training before the first and following the final individual supervision session. The instrument was completed by the participant immediately following the viewing of a section of a counseling session. Each completed CAQ was sealed in a separate coded envelope by each respondent and held by a research assistant until the completion of all data collection.

*Data ratings.* Following the collection of all data, and in line with the procedures used by Martin et al. (1992), four trained raters reviewed the videotaped sessions to insure that the metaphors reported on the supervisor's EMQs were in fact present in the sessions and that the communications met the operational definition of a metaphor. Subsequently, interrater reliability was established for these raters by having two additional raters watching the third, sixth, and ninth session of each tape to determine if similar ratings were found. The interrater agreement was 93%. This coding was then compared with completed EMQs to identify the frequency with which metaphors were used by supervisors and recalled by supervisees. It was determined that the supervisors made use of metaphor a total of 44 times in the 45 supervision sessions. Only 21 metaphors, however, were listed on the supervisors' EMQs as intentionally used, as many of the metaphors not listed were mentioned very briefly and were not explored in detail.

To score the CAQs, three raters were trained following the procedures outlined by Holloway and Wolleat (1980). The three raters independently scored each CAQ for the identification of supervisee conceptualization skills. As in the original study using the CAQ (Holloway & Wolleat, 1980), raters scoring of hypothesis elements was somewhat varied, resulting in an overall interrater reliability of .55, compared to the .649 reported by Holloway and Wolleat (1980).

### **RESULTS**

The first research question involved the supervisees' recall of events associated with the intentional use of metaphor. The two supervisors intentionally used metaphor in 88% of the sessions (24 out of the 27 sessions)

conducted with the metaphor participants. In 33% of the sessions (6 out of 18 sessions), brief, undeveloped metaphors were inadvertently used with the non-metaphor participants. Metaphors were listed on the supervisors' EMQs as intentionally used a total of 21 times. Nine times these metaphors were recalled by the supervisees as a significant event from the session. In other words, when the supervisors intentionally used metaphors in their sessions, they were recalled as significant events by supervisees 43% of the time. Likewise, 57% of the time events other than metaphor were recalled as significant.

Standard *t* test comparisons were conducted to test for differences between the supervisees' and supervisors' responses to the helpfulness rating on the EMQ to determine if the sessions in which the supervisees recalled metaphor were also rated as more helpful. At an alpha level of .05 the analysis suggested that the supervisees did not view the sessions in which they recalled the supervisors use of metaphor as significantly more helpful ( $t(40) = .7805$ ) than sessions for which other events were recalled.

The second research question involved the comparison of the perceived effectiveness of the supervision sessions for the metaphor and non-metaphor groups. To explore this question a series of *t*-tests were conducted to compare ratings of the Depth, Smoothness, Positivity, and Arousal of sessions for the two groups. The mean rating for the Depth of the sessions for the metaphor group was 5.77 ( $SD = 0.70$ ); for the non-metaphor group, 5.74 ( $SD = 0.92$ ). The mean rating of the Smoothness of the sessions for the metaphor group was 5.42 ( $SD = 0.89$ ); for the non-metaphor group, 5.99 ( $SD = 0.99$ ). The mean rating for the Positivity of the sessions for the metaphor group was 5.80 ( $SD = 0.80$ ); for the non-metaphor group, 5.81 ( $SD = 0.94$ ). Finally, the mean rating of the Arousal for the metaphor group was 4.86 ( $SD = 0.78$ ); for the non-metaphor group, 4.76 ( $SD = 1.28$ ). The *t*-test's results were nonsignificant at an alpha of .05 (Depth  $t(40) = .9107$ , Smoothness  $t(40) = .0612$ , Positivity  $t(40) = .9443$ , Arousal  $t(40) = .7732$ ).

In addition, sessions for which the metaphor participants recalled the supervisors' metaphor and those for which they did not were compared using a series of ANOVAs to examine whether the recall of metaphor would impact the perceived effectiveness of a session with regard to the supervisees' ratings of Depth, Smoothness, Positivity, Arousal and Helpfulness. Results of the analyses indicated that the recall of metaphor did not significantly impact the metaphor participants' ratings of the sessions: Depth,  $F(2,40) = 1.05$ ; Smoothness,  $F(2,40) = 1.81$ ; Positivity,  $F(2,40) = 0.25$ ; Arousal,  $F(2,40) = 1.76$ ; or Helpfulness,  $F(2,40) = 0.04$  at a .05 level of significance.

To address the final research question regarding whether the supervisees receiving intentional metaphor in counseling supervision were able to conceptualize client problems at a more complex level (i.e., generate more advanced clinical hypotheses), means and standard deviations for the two groups were computed. However, due to the small number of participants, further statistical comparisons between the groups were prohibited.

The mean overall quality of hypotheses created by the metaphor and non-metaphor groups were 2.23 and 2.0, respectively, at the pretest, with a higher score indicating a higher quality hypothesis. At posttest, the metaphor participants overall quality of hypotheses were at 2.39 compared to 1.84 for the non-metaphor participants. (See Tables 1 and 2 for scores on all subscales at pretest and posttest.)

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that when counseling supervisors use metaphor, their supervisees are somewhat likely to remember them as important supervision events (i.e., approximately half of the time). It does not appear from the results of this preliminary study, however, that metaphors are more impactful than other supervision events in terms of recall. Further, the results of this study do not provide any statistical evidence that the use of metaphor by counseling supervisors will help their supervisees to develop more complex clinical hypotheses, although the metaphor participants' scores on the CAQ did evidence a trend in the hypothesized direction.

TABLE 1. Mean and Standard Deviation Scores at Pretest for the CAQ

	Metaphor		Non-metaphor	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Elements of understanding	1.33	0.58	1.50	0.71
Time frames	1.67	0.58	1.50	0.71
Type of information used	3.67	1.15	1.50	0.71
Amount of information	5.33	2.08	2.50	2.12
Type of information sought	2.33	1.15	3.00	0.00
Divergent questions	2.67	1.53	2.50	0.71
Overall quality	2.23	0.10	2.00	0.71

*n* = 5

TABLE 2. Mean and Standard Deviation Scores at Posttest for the CAQ

	Metaphor		Non-metaphor	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Elements of understanding	1.67	0.58	2.00	1.41
Time frames	1.67	0.58	1.50	0.71
Type of information used	3.00	0.00	3.00	1.41
Amount of information	5.00	2.00	6.00	2.83
Type of information sought	2.67	0.58	3.00	2.83
Divergent questions	2.67	1.53	3.00	2.83
Overall quality	2.39	0.39	1.84	1.18

*n* = 5

Process observations made by the supervisors and from review of the videotaped sessions by the principle investigator suggested, however, that the use of metaphor was not only noticed but also had an impact. One supervisee indicated how he liked the “analogies” that his supervisor was using and found them helpful. Another supervisee made a comment about the frequency with which her supervisor used metaphor in the sessions. Also, one of the supervisees, in a group supervision session that occurred concurrently with the study, commented on how he had begun to use metaphors with his clients after seeing them modeled by his supervisor. A further impact of supervisor use of metaphor that cannot be inferred from the statistical comparisons, was the fact that at times a metaphor developed in a supervision session provided a underlying theme for the supervision process which was discussed throughout the semester, allowing the supervisee and supervisor to develop a shared language for the supervisee’s experience. For example, early on, one supervisee expressed a great deal of anxiety about her ability to perform adequately in the role of counselor. The supervisor used the metaphor of a lake to discuss how on the surface the supervisee appeared calm and competent. However, underneath the surface of the water, the supervisee added, the currents were rushing and swirling. This metaphor was revisited regularly throughout the semester to discuss the supervisee’s level of anxiety and feelings of efficacy. Thus, there is some qualitative evidence that the supervisor’s intentional use of metaphor did impact the supervisees who heard them in a positive manner.

The fact that the statistical analyses in this study produced nonsignificant results speaks to several limitations to this study which should be considered in interpreting its overall importance. First, the data was collected in a naturalistic setting so that the effect of confounding variables (e.g., differences in clients and internship settings) is not known. Also, the fact that there were a relatively small number of participants in the study limited the likelihood of producing statistical significance due to low power. Finally, it is quite possible that if differences did exist in the metaphor and non-metaphor participants in terms of their hypothesis formation skills, that the instrumentation used (i.e., the CAQ) was not sensitive enough to discern these differences. This is evidenced by the difficulty that exists in establishing intererater agreement for the scoring categories of the instrument. It is



clear that cognitive variables, such as the processing of metaphorical communication and hypothesis formation, are quite difficult to measure and most other existing measures of cognitive skills have similar drawbacks (Morran et al., 1994). Therefore, more sophisticated instrumentation is greatly needed.

A number of writers have described theoretical positive impacts of metaphors on clients; by extrapolation; similar results should be found on counselors' cognitive skills. Tangible evidence of the impact of supervisors' metaphors, however, remains elusive. Nonetheless, process observations made in this study and others (e.g., Amundson, 1988; Ishiyama, 1988) suggest that supervisors use of metaphor may be helpful for supervisees in providing needed themes or stories for the new counselor's experience of the counseling and supervision processes. Subsequently, these findings provide some limited evidence for the value of this technique. Clearly, however, there is a need for additional research using more sensitive instrumentation, as well as qualitative data collection during supervision and counseling sessions, to explore this approach in greater depth.

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