

White Gloves and Cracked Vases: How Metaphors Help Group Workers Construct New Perspectives and Responses

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SUMMARY. The metaphor is one of the most basic mechanisms for understanding our experiences. When we construct metaphors, we use both sides of the brain, the intuitive and rational, with the potential of generating new understanding, new realities, and new behaviors. This article promotes the creation of metaphors as a way for group workers to reflect on their practice. An image of a group offers different dimensions for consideration than verbal descriptions. Metaphor-making and elaboration can be used for learning in the classroom, supervision and practice.

KEYWORDS: Metaphors, group work, group therapy, social work education

Metaphors are said to structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do. When group workers create images or metaphors of their groups, they have access to the structures they are using—their viewpoints and inferences. They can move beyond jargon and fixed interpretations to new realities, understanding, and self-awareness. Metaphor-making is simple, but it can add dimension to group workers' reflective processes—drawing upon both sides of the brain, or “imaginative rationality” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The purpose of the article is to illustrate how metaphors can enlighten group work practice. The author includes a definition of metaphor, a brief review of the literature, illustrations of how to create and carefully use metaphors, and examples of metaphors as means for integrating theory and method, developing self-awareness, reinforcing skills, and tracking progress.

DEFINITION

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that the “essence of metaphor is experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). The word metaphor is derived from the Greek *meta*, meaning above or over and *phorein*, meaning to carry from one place to another. The root words imply that the image created is more than a simple substitution for what is already known. Richards (1936) stated that meaning emerges from the interaction of the total metaphor—the thing signified and the image—allowing those involved to conceptualize data in a different way and generate new ideas. It is the “semantic impertinence” (Richards, 1936) or the “essential doubleness” of metaphors (Burke, 1935:1965) that gives us perspective. Olds (1992) said:

Metaphors are ‘meaning transports’ which extend our level of understanding by comparison, or some might argue by smuggling extra dimensions into our analysis. In either case they enrich the field of potential comprehension. (p. 24)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The clinical literature reflects an interest in the use of metaphors, often as integral to therapeutic work, but also as a primary method (metaphor therapy) (Barker, 1996; Cirillo and Crider, 1995; Erickson and Rossi, 1980; Gergen, 1990; Kopp, 1995). Group work literature illustrates multiple uses of metaphors in

the group process (Camblin, Stone, and Merritt, 1990; Gans, 1991; Gatz and Christie, 1991; Katz, 1983; McClure, 1989; Sunderland, 1997-98). Several authors used metaphors from the group's talk to conceptualize and track group development (Christiansen, 1990; Srivastva and Barrett, 1988). Barrett and others utilized the concept of generative metaphors for large group and organizational changes (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990; Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar, 1995). Middleman and Wood (1985, 1993) promoted visual, imaginative methods of teaching and practice. Larsen-McKay (2000) and Bernstein (1998) studied the use of metaphors in teaching and training. This article differs in that it accents the worker's metaphor of the group as a way of learning. The following is a detailed example of this use of metaphor in a classroom.¹

DRAWING TOGETHER METHOD AND THEORY

As a warm-up for group work class, the teacher rolled out a sheet of mural paper and asked the students (one at a time) to draw a picture of something they had feelings about, related to their practice. One student drew a pair of white gloves with little buttons at the wrists. She explained that this was how she saw her women's group—the members were so nice and so supportive, but little work was getting done. She found that she did not want to go to group meetings. She offered that she came from a family that dealt openly with differences, so she was accustomed to frankness and contest.

Among the images drawn, the white gloves attracted the most interest and the class chose to focus on them.² The teacher then worked with the class to make associations, to explore the meaning of the image in relation to the group that it signified, to consider relevant theory, and to develop practice alternatives.

Students quickly offered associations: "being proper," "nice," "polite," "keeping clean," "the white gloves test," "society," "church," and "protection." The student/worker clarified that the group was for women who had been sexually and physically abused. The associations took on greater meaning. The women presented well, but may not have felt particularly clean, nice, or safe. "Taking off the gloves," in boxing terms, meant no fight, but it also meant that participants would have to somehow face their differences, perhaps get "down and dirty." Asked how the women felt about the pace of the group, the worker identified one member who seemed quite satisfied with the way things were and one member who seemed impatient (like the worker, herself). The class began to see the two group members as dealing with the same issue (the development of trust, the risk of alienation), but being on different ends of the continuum.

The teacher drew in available theory, asking them to consider the effects of trauma (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk and Fislser, 1995) and the importance of establishing safety and self-soothing skills in the beginning of the group (Schiller and Zimmer, 1994). She asked them to consider Schiller's model of group development (1995, 1997), which highlights the importance, for women, of building a relational base and establishing a felt sense of safety before challenging each other. This model contrasts with traditional group stage models (Garland, Jones, and Kolodny, 1965; Northen, 1969; Shulman, 1999; Tuckman, 1965) that place primary power struggles in the early stages of the group. Conflict in women's groups, according to Schiller (1995, 1997), occurs within the context of connections, initial differentiation, mutuality and interpersonal empathy.

The class worked back and forth between the image, the group, the worker, and theory, being careful to stay with the worker in constructing meaning. The white glove metaphor made known the tension the worker was experiencing at that particular point in the group's life and offered some clues about the source of that tension. The metaphor helped everyone appreciate the vulnerability of the women in this group and to think of their cautiousness in a more complex way.

The discussion turned to possible approaches. In metaphoric terms, the members could experiment with the gloves—take them off one at a time, take both off briefly at first, and put them back on when things got scary; the worker could experiment with some kid gloves—try approaching the women's fears more gently. In concrete terms, the worker could: (1) take time to assess with the members how they felt the group was going and what they were ready to do at this point—did they feel safe enough to go deeper into their experiences of abuse? (2) affirm the steps they had already taken to make connections with each other and to assure safety, (3) acknowledge and support the expression of differences, and (4) share the worker's own tension about the pace and reach for any ambivalence or difference in viewpoints. To do the latter, the worker might consider using the white glove metaphor directly to see if it had any meaning for the members. This should be offered carefully, however, and with a willingness to accept the members' interpretations without judgement.

In the example above, consideration of the metaphor, in conjunction with practice theory, helped the worker develop greater empathy for the group members; she approached the next session with more energy and direction. In addition, because of its collective work and shared meaning around the metaphor, the class as-a-whole moved to a new level of cohesion. "There is a unique way in which the maker and the appreciator[s] of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another" (Cohen, 1970, p. 6).

METAPHOR-MAKING AND REFLECTION

Because the human conceptual system is metaphoric in nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), the creation of metaphors comes easily. Here are some spontaneous responses given by group workers, when asked the question, "What image or metaphor comes to mind when you think of your group?"

- a bowl of chili that has different levels of spiciness on different days (but you're not always in the mood for chili)
- a couch that is comfortable but has a few broken springs
- a warm nest lined with soft feathers (for women rape victims until they are ready to fly)
- a hard workout that hurts, but is good for you (men's group)
- the very end of the toothpaste and you squeeze out everything that you can. You wonder, "Will you get anything?" "Will it glop out?"
- the New York stock exchange
- a rock tumbler (smoothing rough edges, bringing out color and shine)
- A mine field (the old staff knew where the explosives were, but the new staff did not know)

- Vases that have cracks in them—parents who have lost custody of their children because of addiction and other problems. The vases come in all shapes, sizes and colors; some are more damaged than others, requiring different time periods for restoration. The leader and the group are the glue helping to mend the cracks, so that eventually the vases can hold water and flowers (the children).

Construction and exploration of metaphors, as a reflective process, can be done in the context of a class, supervision, or consultation group. This has the advantage of multiple perspectives. Metaphoric reflection can also be done individually. It is particularly useful when a worker is feeling stuck or is puzzled about something that is happening (or not happening) in the group.

DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS

Metaphors allow group workers to explore their feelings about their group. The worker who described the bowl of chili, representing a teen-age boys' group at a court clinic, said that he could not predict whether the chili would be spicy or not and whether he would be in the mood for such a dish. A number of questions come to mind, still staying with the metaphor. For example: Did the worker, coming from a different culture, race, ethnicity, and class, have different "tastes" than the members? Was he unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the spiciness of the slang, swears, and posturing of the members? How did he understand their behavior? What were his competencies in cooking? Could he rely on the cooking skills of the members? What did he know about the ingredients—the steps, amounts, and methods of cooking that would result in a melding but differentiation of flavors? Did he know when to stir the pot? Was there a possibility that the chili could get too hot and, if so, what could he do to prevent this? For example, had he developed clear group norms and structures and had he ensured that the institution had a safety plan, if he needed backup? Sometimes dilemmas can be solved through the metaphor itself, without clarification and interpretation. The point is that if workers have greater self-awareness and understand the dimensions of their groups more fully, then they can move to a different stance or action plan.

Sometimes metaphors can be introduced by a supervisor or colleague to generate new meaning. For example, a practitioner who led a group of school-aged, very active boys told her supervisor how exhausted and discouraged she was about her experience. She explained that she baked cookies and brought several activities for the boys each week in order to meet their individual choices. No matter what she did, the boys were still dissatisfied and ran all over the place. The supervisor noted that there was a parallel "running around" in the worker's efforts to fill them up and make them all happy; she said spontaneously, "It's not a birthday party, you know." After a few seconds of thought, the worker was able to talk about the purpose of the group and consider that the boys' individual needs could be met, eventually, by their developing ties and learning group-based skills—expressing, listening, waiting, deciding, playing, disagreeing. She did not have to personally satisfy each member. She accepted that a number of struggles were ahead, but she left with a clearer understanding of the group and her role in its process.

REINFORCING SKILLS

Metaphors can enlighten workers about the nature of a particular kind of group and help them gain appreciation for the skills that they already have. For example, a clinician offered the metaphor of a loaf of bread for her group in a day treatment center. The group was on-going, with open membership. As the baker, she had to be flexible, working with the ingredients on hand, the “feel” of the dough, and the conditions of the environment. She said that sometimes the bread needed more flour or water; sometimes she had to knead it and other times simply let it rise in a warm place. Metaphorically, she elaborated the competence necessary for leading these often undervalued day treatment groups. She also provided a compelling image for explaining these groups to others.

TRACKING PROGRESS VIA METAPHOR SHIFTS

A metaphor of a group will often shift over time, in line with shifts in experiences and relationships. For example, a student was assigned a collection of women in a nursing home, because they were “narcissistic, whining, and demanding.” Her initial metaphor for this group—elderly women looking at themselves in separate mirrors—followed the staff’s descriptions. Asked how she would like to see the women at the end of the group, she said they would be looking in the mirror and seeing other women reflected there, that is, other group members. In the student’s final paper, she used an entirely different metaphor. She described the group as rare animals whose environment could not sustain their needs and freedom, so they had to be brought into a closed space for protection and survival. Her basic assumptions had changed. She no longer saw the source of the problem in the individuals; rather, they were unique, vulnerable, and beautiful. She recognized the problems in the system. Her work included, therefore, attention both to the women and to the nursing home procedures and attitudes that affected them. Passick and White (1991) asked trainees in a substance abuse counseling course to capture the essence of the therapist-client relationship.

The first metaphors invented, for example, “General Patton,” often reflected the trainees’ own strict attitudes toward addiction and the level of control they believed was necessary for successful treatment. At the end of the training, they invented metaphors that captured a more collaborative, appropriately responsible stance, for example, a cab driver taking passengers around an unfamiliar city, pointing out choices.

CAUTIONS

Some cautions apply to the use of metaphors. They are time-bound and context specific. They vary from culture to culture. A “full plate,” for example, has very different meanings for people with and without economic advantages. People who speak different languages may come to different metaphors and hence different realities. Dichos are examples of metaphors particular to Latino clients (Zuniga, 1992). Metaphors can limit and restrict our way of thinking because they emphasize some aspect of a situation at the expense of other, perhaps equally important ones. Practitioners can sometimes be “prisoners of their metaphors,” if they are unable to step back from them to see alternative realities (Rosenblatt, 1994). Discussions of metaphors can take a competitive turn and/or ignore the interpretations that make sense to the creator. Reflections should be mutually respectful and helpful, as well as fun.

Used prudently, metaphors can help us to: (1) discover dimensions of reality or meaning not previously considered; (2) operate on several, even contradictory levels, with multiple responses; (3) by-pass resistant postures; (4) create a verbal play space; (5) highlight the moment; (6) promote interaction around a shared image; (7) allow explorations that are culturally meaningful; (8) link the imaginative and the cognitive; and (9) create, sustain and transform basic assumptions about systems (Gans, 1991).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphors are not simply poetic or rhetorical embellishments, but are essential to human understanding. Lordan (1996) said that social work education requires a framework that allows students to develop in a holistic way, including scientific and artistic thinking. She said simply that the whole mind must be awakened (p. 63). This article has illustrated how reflective use of metaphors can awaken the mind, how images can help group workers unpack situations that are puzzling, help integrate method and theory, reinforce skills, and develop greater self-awareness.

NOTES

1. Some details of the examples have been altered for this article.
2. The teacher asked the students to place a hand on the image that had the most meaning for them. The image with the most hands, the white gloves, by sociometric choice (Moreno), represented the central concern of the class. Before proceeding with the majority choice, however, the teacher acknowledged the students in the minority and asked them to say, very briefly to the “artists” of the images they chose, what their connection was. This provided some closure for those students and moved the whole class to a single focus.
3. Schiller noted that the cutting edge of growth for many men is making close connections, but the cutting edge for many women is the ability to hold power comfortably and to engage in conflict.
4. This appears similar to dream work, often done in groups, but in this case the images are consciously created. Participants offer associations and raise questions, but the ultimate meaning is left to the metaphor-maker.