The Use of Metaphor and Drawings in Case Conceptualization

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The author describes a procedure whereby counselors, as part of their conceptualization for case conferences or supervision, develop metaphors and then make them concrete by constructing drawings or collages. The drawings or collages are used as the basis for case discussions.

When describing a counseling case, it is common to use two levels of language. Hampden-Turner (1981) pointed out that there is the object level of language, which refers to basic physical description, and the meta-level of language, of which the metaphor is a good example. A metaphor can be defined as "a statement about one thing that resembles something else. It is the analogous relationship of one thing to another" (Haley, 1976, p. 65). The advantage of using a metaphor is that it allows the counselor to assemble a complex array of information into a relatively simple visual image (Rule, 1983). This image not only describes "what is" but also provides a springboard for developing further insights (Hampden-Turner, 1981).

Case conceptualization bears some resemblance to the metaphoric process in that there is an emphasis on integrating an assortment of cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and interpersonal information into a synthesis (Loganbill & Stoltenberg, 1983). Metaphors can play an important part in arriving at this synthesis. Thus, in many instances, they are useful in furthering case conceptualization (Schn, 1983).

In this article, I suggest a method of extending the usefulness of metaphors in case conceptualization by having counselors make drawings of their metaphorical imagery and use these drawings in case discussions with other counselors. According to Arnhim (1969), the principal virtue of the visual medium is that it allows the representation of objects in two- or threedimensional space, as compared with the one-dimensional sequence of verbal language. This process "not only yields good thought models of physical objects or events, it also represents isomorphically the dimensions needed for theoretical reasoning" (Arnhim, 1969, p. 232).

THE CASE DRAWING METHOD

The method for using case drawings has evolved over a number of years in different contexts (e.g., case conferences, counselor supervision, debriefing in a crisis center). The basic approach is to have counselors, as part of their case conceptualization, draw a picture or make a collage that illustrates, metaphorically, how they see their client and his or her problems. In this drawing, they are asked to include how they see the case proceeding. The purpose of this task, which should be stated explicitly at the outset, is to help counselors better conceptualize the case.

When presenting the drawing task, it is important to establish a set of procedures appropriate to the particular setting. For example, in some settings counselors may take several days to think about their metaphor and construct a drawing or collage. If more immediate attention is warranted, a quick sketch of the metaphor may be all that can be accomplished. The advantage of the longer time period is that the counselor can develop a more complete and carefully considered project. In the shorter time period, the focus becomes the counselor's immediate impressions after a counseling session.

It would be misleading to believe that responses to this drawing procedure are uniformly positive. Although most counselors are excited by the possibilities, some are hesitant and others fearful. There are many reasons for such negative reactions, including insecurity, lack of drawing ability, and inability to visualize. Thus, I suggest that counselors be encouraged to try case drawings, but participation should be voluntary.

The procedure for someone making a presentation with a case drawing usually involves four basic steps. Initially, the case is summarized by the counselor using the case drawing as a type of visual map. In the second step, the particular problem of the client (as it is represented) is discussed. For example, if a client is carrying a heavy load, a question might be raised as to whether this situation is of his or her own making or a result of external sources. In the third step, the focus of the discussion shifts from the client to the counseling relationship. In particular, it may be asked how the relationship seems in terms of potency, direction, responsibility, and involvement. In the example of the client carrying a heavy load, it may be asked whether the counselor is sharing the load, pointing the way, or helping the client unload some of the burden. Finally, the discussion shifts to how the drawing might be altered to reflect a different counseling orientation or approach. In some cases, the counselor may choose to redo the drawing to reflect some of the insights that have been derived through the discussion. If a new drawing or a new addition to the existing drawing is made, it can serve as a specific reminder of new insight and, perhaps, a change in counseling direction.

Some counselors have shared their drawings with clients and used this process as an opportunity to assess what has been accomplished and to set future goals. In this respect, the drawing becomes another counseling tool that helps counselors and clients assess counseling progress and direction. Clients also may be invited to construct a similar drawing for themselves, and the two drawings can then be compared and discussed.

The overall impact of the case drawing method can be observed at several different levels. For some, the benefit seems to come from the development and drawing of the metaphor. As an illustration, consider the following statement made by one counselor:
As I started drawing, the impact of the meaning in the relationship between the would-be rescuer (counselor) and the "rescuer" (client) really struck me and gave me much food for thought. I enjoyed doing the drawing and completed it fairly rapidly, but felt disturbed by the dynamics evident in it.

For others, additional insight comes through the case discussion or the sharing of the drawing with a client. A more detailed case illustration is provided below to demonstrate the process and insights derived through the case discussion.

**CASE ILLUSTRATION**

A counselor in a community college setting was working with a female client who was attending college full-time and undergoing considerable stress in her life. The client was 38 years of age, a single mother, on welfare, with 4-year-old twin daughters. Her ex-husband was behind on his alimony payments. Her boyfriend was an alcoholic. She had previously been accused by a neighbor of child abuse and had been asked by her social worker to enroll in parenting classes.

In trying to capture the various elements of this situation as part of a case conference, the counselor constructed a drawing (see Figure 1). In this drawing, the client is trying to climb toward a job and satisfying relationships but is dragging behind her an alcoholic boyfriend and her children. She is looking back at her children, the boyfriend, and other signs of problems (e.g., divorce, welfare, bad mother). Her financial aid worker, a teacher, and the counselor are all standing above her as angels pointing the way toward parenting classes, retraining, assertiveness training, good mother, job, and satisfying relationships.

In a group supervision session, several points were raised with respect to this drawing that helped the counselor increase her insight into the case in various ways. Some of the issues raised were:

1. The angels might be pointing upward, but until they have the attention of the client, she is going to be looking and sliding down the hill. Getting the client's attention might involve coming out of the cloud and moving closer to basic realities.
2. The chains attached to the alcoholic boyfriend and the children are, in many respects, of the client's making. The client should be encouraged to consider how changes might be initiated (e.g., dealing assertively with her boyfriend, placing her children at her side rather than behind her).
3. The counselor is placed furthest from the client, and the drawing of the counselor's face is incomplete. If the counselor is to make a significant impact, she will have to become more involved and supportive and move closer to the client.

Based on this feedback, the counselor assumed a more supportive role and helped the client deal with these and other

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**FIGURE 1**

Case Drawing
issues that arose through the counseling sessions. She con-
structed another drawing at the conclusion of the counselor’s
involvement in this case. In this drawing, the client was emerg-
ing from a maze of problems with her children at her side and
with an angel, but she was now walking beside the client and
facilitating the client’s own decision making.

In summary, the use of case drawing provides a novel method
of conceptualizing client problems and the counseling relation-
ship and the means whereby conceptualizations are made con-
crete through drawings or collages. In some situations, this pro-
cedure can prove to be a useful addition for case conceptualization
and group discussion. Research is necessary to determine under
what conditions and with what types of people this approach
is most effective.

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