

A factor analysis of metaphor functions in psychotherapy

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Psychotherapy (or psychological counseling) is a major context of application for cognitivist metaphor theories. Metaphors are thought to perform at least five key therapeutic functions: i) helping clients express emotions and attitudes, ii) helping therapists and clients explain difficult concepts, iii) introducing new frames of reference, iv) alleviating client resistance, and v) building a collaborative relationship between therapist and client (Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks, 2001). There is much discourse analytic research on how these functions are enacted in psychotherapy talk, but they tend to assume that i) the functions are indeed perceived as such by therapists and clients, and ii) metaphorical language is superior to non-metaphorical language in performing them. This paper reports results from a survey study (N=150) to critically interrogate these assumptions. Participants read two constructed therapy dialogues, counterbalanced for presentation sequence and controlled for all other differences, where therapist and client discuss an issue using metaphorical and literal language respectively. Each dialogue is followed by a 15-item questionnaire to rate how well the presumed functions were performed (e.g. *the therapist and client can work effectively together*, *the therapist is able to explain difficult concepts*). A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) reveals that the espoused five-factor model does not provide a satisfactory fit for the survey results (model χ^2 $p < 0.001$, CFI=0.894, SRMR=0.066, RMSEA=0.104). A subsequent Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with orthogonal varimax rotation suggests that, instead of the five distinct functions proposed in the literature, participants discerned three functions (model χ^2 $p = 0.043$, TLI=0.944, RMSEA=0.0748) reflecting a more holistic and comprehensive view of what metaphors can do. A second EFA conducted on literal responses yielded only two factors, lending support to the view that literal language is less functionally nuanced. Within-subjects metaphor vs. literal ratings of the items under the emergent three-factor structure were then compared. Metaphor ratings were significantly higher in all three factors ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that metaphorical language is indeed perceived as more effective than literal language when discussing various aspects of clients' issues. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings will be elaborated.

References

Lyddon, W. J., Clay, A. L., & Sparks, C. L. (2001). Metaphor and change in counselling. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 79(3), 269–274.