

PSIHOLOGIA CLINICĂ

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR USING METAPHORS IN THERAPEUTIC COMMUNICATION AND CLINICAL PRACTICE

STRATEGII PRACTICE PENTRU UTILIZAREA METAFORELOR ÎN COMUNICAREA TERAPEUTICĂ ȘI PRACTICA CLINICĂ

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Abstract

Metaphors are essential components of therapeutic communication and clinical practice, serving as bridges between abstract concepts and tangible experiences. This article explores the multifaceted role of metaphors as cognitive tools for enhancing understanding, evoking emotional resonance, and facilitating psychological transformation. Drawing on foundational theoretical frameworks, including Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Embodied Cognition, the paper underscores the practical application of metaphors in diverse therapeutic contexts. Key strategies for selecting, adapting, and integrating metaphors into therapy are presented, alongside case studies illustrating their effectiveness in cognitive-behavioural therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Emphasis is placed on cultural considerations, adaptation, and continuous innovation to ensure metaphors remain relevant and impactful. The findings highlight the transformative potential of metaphors in fostering emotional processing, cognitive flexibility, and therapeutic engagement. Recommendations are provided for practitioners aiming to refine their use of metaphors, with implications for future research in therapeutic discourse.

Keywords: metaphors, emotions, reflection, psychological transformation, cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy, cognitive flexibility.

Rezumat

Metaforele sunt parte integrantă a comunicării terapeutice și a practicii clinice, servind drept punți între concepte abstracte și experiențe tangibile. Acest articol explorează rolul metaforelor ca instrumente cognitive care facilitează înțelegerea, rezonanța emoțională și transformarea psihologică. Printr-o sinteză a metodelor teoretice, inclusiv Teoria metaforelor conceptuale și Cognația încorporată, lucrarea subliniază aplicarea practică a metaforelor în diverse contexte terapeutice. Sunt prezentate strategii cheie pentru selectarea, adaptarea și integrarea metaforelor în terapie, alături de studii de caz care ilustrează eficiența acestora în terapia cognitiv-comportamentală și Terapia de acceptare și angajament. Se pune accent pe considerentele culturale, adaptarea și inovarea continuă pentru a se asigura că metaforele rămân relevante și de impact. Descoperirile evidențiază potențialul transformator al metaforelor în stimularea procesării emoționale, a flexibilității cognitive și a angajamentului terapeutic. Sunt oferite recomandări pentru practicieni care urmăresc să își rafineze utilizarea metaforelor, cu implicații pentru cercetările viitoare în discursul terapeutic.

Cuvinte-cheie: metafore, emoții, reflecție, transformare psihologică, psihoterapie cognitiv-comportamentală, flexibilitate cognitivă.

Introduction. Metaphors transcend their role as mere linguistic constructs, acting as bridges that connect abstract ideas to concrete experiences. In therapy and psychology, metaphors are for making abstract concepts accessible and relatable. They provide individuals with cognitive tools to reframe their perceptions and engage more deeply with complex subject matter. Describing anxiety as “a stormy sea” helps clients visualize the turbulence and anticipate the eventual calmness of their emotions. This article investigates the theoretical foundations, therapeutic applications, and cultural implications of metaphor use. Through practical examples and interdisciplinary insights, it underscores metaphors’ transformative potential in specialized discourse and therapy.

Existing research highlights the crucial role of metaphors in psychotherapy, providing a solid foundation for their use as therapeutic tools. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, demonstrated that metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but fundamental cognitive processes that shape how individuals perceive and understand the world. They introduced the concepts of source domain and target domain, explaining how metaphors facilitate the transfer of meaning between familiar and abstract concepts. However, the current literature does not fully address how these theories can be applied in diverse cultural contexts or specific therapeutic modalities [12].

The theory of embodied cognition posits that metaphor comprehension involves sensory and motor systems. Neuroimaging studies have shown that phrases such as “grasping an idea” activate brain regions responsible for physical grasping. This dual activation enhances emotional and cognitive resonance, making metaphors effective therapeutic tools. Hayes et al. (1999) extended these ideas within the framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), employing therapeutic metaphors such as “passengers on a

bus” to promote psychological flexibility. Despite the theoretical appeal, there is still limited empirical evidence comparing the effectiveness of these metaphors with other therapeutic approaches. [1].

In cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), Beck (1979) utilized metaphors like “faulty wiring” to explain cognitive distortions. However, recent research indicates the need for the cultural adaptation of such metaphors. Chen (2009) highlighted how metaphors that resonate in Western cultures may not hold the same impact in non-Western settings, where symbolism and meaning significantly differ.

The purpose of the study is to reveal the value of using metaphors in therapy.

Methods. This study employed a qualitative research design to explore and develop practical strategies for using metaphors in therapeutic communication and clinical practice. The methodology was designed to ensure academic rigor, reproducibility, and applicability across diverse therapeutic settings.

Study Design: A qualitative approach was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with therapists and the analysis of case studies. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how metaphors are selected, adapted, and utilized in therapy.

Research group involved 5 licensed therapists with at least four years of experience in cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). The participants were recruited from various cultural backgrounds to ensure diversity in metaphor usage and adaptation. Inclusion criteria required active engagement in clinical practice and demonstrated familiarity with metaphor-based interventions.

Data Collection:

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed insights into therapists’ experiences with metaphors. Questions focused on the metaphor selection process, cultural considerations, and observed client responses.

Case Studies: Participants provided anonymized case studies demonstrating how specific metaphors were integrated into therapy and their therapeutic outcomes.

Instruments: An interview guide was developed to structure the semi-structured interviews, focusing on: Types of metaphors commonly used in therapy; Criteria for metaphor selection; Adaptations made to suit individual client needs; Challenges encountered during metaphor implementation.

Data Analysis: A thematic analysis approach was used to identify recurring patterns and themes in the data. Transcripts of interviews and case studies were coded, and key themes were extracted: Characteristics of effective metaphors; Cultural and contextual considerations; Impact of metaphors use on client outcomes. Data reliability was ensured through inter-coder agreement and participant validation of findings.

Ethical Considerations: The study adhered to ethical guidelines, including: Obtaining informed consent from all participants and clients involved in case studies or observed sessions; Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in data reporting.

Practical Approaches to Metaphor Use in Specialized Discourse. Contextual Understanding. Effective metaphor use begins with understanding the specific domain of discourse and the audience's expertise. In therapy, metaphors like "nurturing a seed" resonate well with clients familiar with gardening, fostering engagement and relatability.

Tailored Selection. Metaphors must align with the audience's cultural and experiential background. For instance, the Japanese concept of "kintsugi" — repairing broken pottery with gold — serves as a powerful metaphor for resilience in therapeutic contexts. Therapists can draw on this metaphor to help clients view personal flaws as part of their unique strength.

Integration into Communication. Metaphors are most effective when seamlessly

integrated into verbal or written communication. For example, in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), the metaphor "leaves on a stream" is used to illustrate mindfulness and the transient nature of thoughts.

Key considerations include:

Field-Specific Relevance: Align metaphors with the specialized discourse to ensure they resonate with the audience.

Audience Expertise: Tailor metaphors to the audience's level of understanding to avoid misinterpretation or confusion.

Communication Goals: Use metaphors to achieve clarity, foster engagement, and enhance retention of key concepts.

Selecting and Adapting Metaphors:

1. *Choosing Metaphors:* Effective metaphors are those that closely align with therapeutic concepts while being relatable and impactful. For example: In psychoanalysis, Freud's metaphor of the "iceberg" effectively illustrates the layers of the conscious and unconscious mind (Freud, 1900). In CBT, "cognitive distortions" are likened to "faulty wiring," which simplifies the understanding of automatic negative thoughts and maladaptive thinking patterns (Beck, 1979) [2].

2. *Adapting to Audience:* Metaphors must be tailored to the cultural, linguistic, and experiential background of the audience to maximize their relevance and impact. For example, using the metaphor "weaving a tapestry" to describe interconnected life experiences may resonate in collectivist cultures, while "building a bridge" may appeal to more individualistic audiences (Chen, 2009) [5].

Integrating Metaphors in Communication: The integration of metaphors into specialized discourse involves seamless inclusion within verbal and written communication to clarify and emphasize key points [11]. This can be achieved through: *Vivid Imagery:* Craft metaphors that evoke strong mental images, such as describing trauma as "a suitcase packed too tightly, ready to burst."

Interactive Engagement: Encourage clients or audiences to co-create metaphors, fostering a deeper connection to the material. *Strategic Placement:* Use metaphors to introduce, emphasize, or conclude complex ideas, ensuring they remain memorable.

Strategies for implementing metaphors:

1. Contextual Understanding. The success of metaphor usage begins with an in-depth understanding of the communication environment [6]: **Domain Specificity:** Identify the particular field, whether therapy, education, or scientific communication, where metaphors will be applied. **Audience Insights:** Assess the knowledge, expectations, and cultural backgrounds of the audience. **Communication Objectives:** Define the goals, such as simplifying abstract concepts, persuading, or fostering emotional connection [7].

2. Selecting Relevant Metaphors. Choosing the right metaphor involves: **Resonance with Subject Matter:** Align metaphors with the thematic essence of the topic. For example, in therapy, “climbing a mountain” may symbolize resilience. **Accessibility:** Avoid convoluted or esoteric imagery that may alienate the audience. **Originality:** Sidestep overused clichés, opting for fresh and imaginative analogies.

3. Adapting to the Audience. Tailor metaphors to suit the audience’s background: **Clarifications and Explanations:** Provide additional context if necessary to ensure understanding. **Interactive Engagement:** Encourage the audience to interpret and personalize metaphors, deepening their connection to the subject.

4. Seamless Integration. Metaphors should be embedded naturally within communication: **Verbal Communication:** Use metaphors in storytelling, examples, and discussions to create vivid mental imagery. **Written Documents:** Incorporate metaphors in reports, articles, or presentations to simplify technical details.

5. Evaluation and Reflection. Continuously assess the effectiveness of met-

aphors: **Audience Feedback:** Gather responses to measure comprehension and emotional impact. **Iterative Improvement:** Refine metaphorical strategies based on observed outcomes and insights [9].

6. Continuous Innovation. Stay informed about developments in metaphor theory: **Research Trends:** Incorporate insights from emerging studies. **Collaborative Feedback:** Work with peers to discover innovative metaphors that resonate within specialized domains.

Case Study:

Therapeutic Applications of Metaphors

In practice, the use of metaphorical techniques has demonstrated notable therapeutic benefits. For instance, a client struggling with perfectionism described their journey as “climbing a mountain with no summit.” Through metaphor work, the therapist introduced the idea of “choosing a different path” or “pausing to enjoy the view,” which encouraged the client to reconsider their relentless pursuit of unattainable goals. In a separate case, a client experiencing anxiety likened their feelings to “quicksand.” The therapist extended the metaphor by introducing “a sturdy branch” as a coping strategy, emphasizing small, steady actions to regain control and stability. *Clinical Use of Metaphors.*

1. Enhancing Cognitive Flexibility:

Metaphors help clients reframe their experiences, encouraging alternative interpretations and behaviours. For instance:

“Fogged glasses” illustrate how negative thought patterns obscure reality, prompting clients to “clean their lenses” for clearer perspectives.

“A candle burning at both ends” vividly captures the essence of burnout, enabling clients to visualize and prioritize self-care [8].

2. Facilitating Emotional Processing:

Metaphors provide a safe distance from emotionally charged experiences, enabling clients to explore and process their feelings without becoming overwhelmed. For example: Comparing obsessive-com-

pulsive disorder (OCD) to “a bully” highlights the coercive nature of the disorder and empowers clients to resist its demands [14].

3. *Enhancing Memory and Retention*: The vivid and interactive nature of metaphors ensures they are memorable. Techniques such as role-play or sensory integration can further enhance their impact. For example: Using physical actions, such as mimicking “walking with a broken leg,” reinforces the concept of gradual healing and resilience [2].

Practical Examples from Literature: *Teasdale (1993)*: Highlighted the memory-enhancing effects of metaphors in therapy, particularly when linked to vivid imagery or sensory experiences [14].

Kopp (1995): Described metaphor therapy techniques, including role-playing exercises, to deepen client engagement [10]. *Hayes et al. (1999)*: Demonstrated how ACT metaphors like “passengers on a bus” improve psychological flexibility [8].

Challenges and Cultural Considerations

1. *Cultural Specificity*: Metaphors are culturally bound, and their meanings may vary significantly. Therapists must be attuned to these variations and adapt their language accordingly (Chen, 2009) [5].

2. *Oversimplification*: While metaphors simplify complex ideas, they risk reducing multifaceted issues to overly simplistic terms. Therapists must strike a balance, ensuring metaphors serve as entry points for deeper exploration.

3. *Risk of Misinterpretation*: Clients may interpret metaphors differently based on their personal experiences. Open dialogue is crucial to align understanding and ensure therapeutic goals are met.

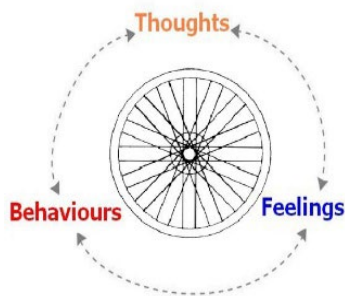
Practical Techniques of Using Metaphors in Psychotherapy

Technique 1: “Navigating Life’s Path with Cycles” – A Metaphor for Therapy and Self-Improvement. This metaphor draws parallels between cycling and the recurring loops of thoughts, emotions,

and behaviours in cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). Much like the rotational motion of a bicycle’s wheels, individuals often find themselves trapped in repetitive “negative cycles.” In therapy, the goal is to “hit the brakes” by intervening in these cycles—whether by reframing thoughts, modifying behaviours, or addressing emotional responses [4].

Practical Applications: *Recognizing Negative Cycles*: Clients explore recurring patterns that perpetuate their challenges, identifying specific thoughts, feelings, and actions contributing to their struggles. *Adopting New Approaches*: Therapists assist clients in experimenting with alternative actions, perspectives, or responses to metaphorically “shift gears” and redirect their journey. *Staying Present*: Just as cyclists focus on the road ahead to maintain balance, mindfulness encourages clients to stay in the present, avoiding the distractions of past regrets or future anxieties [13].

Key Concepts of Cycles in CBT:



CBT often addresses cycles like panic loops, negative thought spirals, and maintenance routines. This approach frames therapy as a self-help journey, likened to cycling. Einstein’s famous quote underscores this metaphor: “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.” The foundational CBT cycle—thoughts, feelings, and behaviours—can be interrupted or adjusted at any point. For example:

Thoughts: Reevaluate and challenge negative interpretations.

Feelings: Explore and regulate emotional responses.

Behaviours: Implement alternative actions to disrupt the cycle.

Breaking the Cycle: Reflection and Intervention 1. Analyse a Recent Incident: *Thoughts:* What crossed your mind? What images or assumptions emerged? How did you interpret the situation? *Feelings:* Identify your emotional state and its intensity. What sensations did you experience physically? *Behaviours:* How did you react? What was your automatic response? Did any coping mechanisms come into play?

2. Making a Change: What alternative actions or thoughts could you have tried? Would these changes have led to a more constructive outcome? Physical activity, like cycling, serves as a metaphor for mood improvement and stress relief, illustrating how even small shifts can promote positive change.

1. Goal Setting and Navigating Challenges: 1. *Destination Mapping:* Clarify your objectives: Where are you headed? What steps will get you there? Measure progress by identifying changes in thoughts, behaviours, and perceptions. 2. *Overcoming Obstacles:* Recognize the “baggage” or challenges slowing you down. Use strategies like “changing gears” (adapting approaches) or taking breaks to refuel and reset. 3. *Mindful Riding:* Stay attuned to the present, redirecting focus from distractions to the task at hand. Notice your surroundings, sensations, and rhythm, maintaining a steady course.

Crashes, Punctures, and Maintenance: Setbacks are part of the journey-whether a fall or a flat tire. The key is to pause, assess, repair, and resume. Progress also requires ongoing maintenance, akin to keeping a bike in good condition: Identify practices that help and continue them; Eliminate unhelpful habits; Regularly remind yourself of the tools and strategies that foster resilience.

Inspiration and Resources: Modeling Success: Imagine following someone you admire-a real person, fictional character, or role model-and emulate their qualities and actions.

Harnessing Strengths: Recognize and leverage your personal strengths. Often, we use these strengths in specific contexts but forget their availability in other situations. Enjoying the Ride: Treat life not just as a destination but as a journey to savour. Even during difficult stretches, adopt the mindset of a leisurely cyclist-embracing the process with curiosity and adaptability.

By using this metaphor, CBT encourages clients to view their challenges as navigable paths. With deliberate effort, mindfulness, and strategic changes, it’s possible to transform these cycles into productive, empowering journeys.

Technique 2: “Backpacks” – Reframing the Problem The “backpack” analogy illustrates personal challenges as a load carried through life. This metaphor encourages clients to explore the metaphorical backpack they carry, uncovering its contents-past experiences, emotions, and beliefs-and identifying how it impacts their well-being [4].

Application: 1. *Examining the Backpack:* Clients are prompted to visualize their backpack, considering its size, weight, and organization. This mental exercise externalizes their struggles, creating a sense of separation from the problem. 2. *Easing the Burden:* Therapists guide clients to “unpack” the backpack, removing unnecessary burdens or rearranging its contents to make it easier to manage. 3. *Imagining Life Without It:* Clients are encouraged to envision how their life might improve without carrying the backpack, fostering motivation for change and a sense of possibility.

Understanding the Backpack. We all carry metaphorical backpacks on our journey through life. These backpacks hold memories, beliefs, and expectations that shape how we view ourselves, interact with others, and face challenges. By visu-

alizing problems as a “backpack,” clients can detach from their struggles and view them objectively, making it easier to initiate meaningful changes.

Exploring the Backpack. Clients are invited to reflect on their “backpack” by considering:

Past: Unresolved memories, repetitive thoughts, and recurring worries about previous experiences.

Present: Current challenges, stresses, or life situations causing discomfort.

Future: Fears or anxieties about what lies ahead and doubts about their ability to handle it.

Core Beliefs: Deep-seated ideas about themselves, others, and the world that shape their perspective.

Visualization Exercise. Clients are asked to picture their backpack: *What colour is it? How large or heavy does it feel? How do they carry it—over one shoulder, with two straps, or on wheels? How secure is it? Does it have zippers, buttons, or a lock? What would happen if it opened unexpectedly? How would that affect them? Are there exterior pockets? If so, what’s inside them?* Clients might also find it helpful to draw their imagined backpack.

Carrying the Backpack: Clients are encouraged to explore the impact of carrying their backpack: *Physical Sensations: How does the weight manifest in their body? Do they feel tense, fatigued, or restless?*

Emotional States: What emotions frequently arise—sadness, anxiety, or anger?

Thought Patterns: What repetitive thoughts or memories come to mind while carrying the backpack?

Behavioural Responses: What actions do they take to cope? Are these behaviours helpful or counterproductive?

Identifying Patterns and Exceptions:

Are there times when the backpack feels lighter or less burdensome?

What circumstances make it heavier or more overwhelming?

Can the client recall moments when

they set the backpack down, even briefly?

Reflecting on these patterns can highlight potential coping mechanisms and areas for change.

Alleviating the Load. Therapists help clients explore options for reducing their burden: *Can they imagine carrying a smaller or lighter backpack? What items could be removed or replaced? How would a “new” backpack look and feel? What resources or tools would they choose to carry instead?*

Clients are encouraged to envision how they would act, think, and feel differently if their backpack were lighter—or gone altogether.

Discarding the Backpack. Clients reflect on the possibility of setting down their backpack permanently: *When and where could they leave it? How would they feel—both emotionally and physically—without it? What differences would others notice in their demeanour or behavior?* A guided visualization exercise might involve imagining waking up one morning without their backpack. What would they do first? How would their day unfold differently?

Moving Forward. Based on their insights, clients create a plan to implement changes: *What should I stop doing? What should I do less of? What should I start or do more often?* By shifting their thoughts and behaviours, clients can practice living without their backpack or carrying a lighter version.

Thinking Differently. Clients are encouraged to remind themselves: *How the backpack influences their thoughts, emotions, and actions. What life feels like without the backpack. The steps they need to take to lighten their load permanently.* With regular practice, they can embrace a “new self” free from the burdens of their old backpack.

Results The results of this study provide valuable insights into the practical use of metaphors in therapeutic communication and their effectiveness in diverse clinical contexts. Data collected from interviews, case studies, and field observa-

tions revealed three main themes: effective characteristics of metaphors, cultural and contextual considerations, and the impact of metaphors on client outcomes.

a) *Characteristics of Effective Metaphors*: Therapists identified several attributes that make metaphors effective in therapy:

b) *Relevance to the Client's Experience*: Metaphors closely aligned with the client's personal and cultural background were found to resonate deeply, facilitating understanding and emotional connection.

c) *Imagery and Simplicity*: Vivid, straightforward metaphors such as "fogged glasses" for distorted thinking were more likely to engage clients and promote cognitive shifts.

d) *Flexibility*: Metaphors that could be adapted to suit the client's unique perspective, such as "nurturing a seed" or "climbing a mountain," were reported as particularly impactful.

2. Cultural and Contextual Considerations: Cultural adaptation emerged as a critical factor in the success of metaphor usage. For example, therapists practicing in collectivist cultural contexts reported that metaphors emphasizing interconnectedness and communal values, such as "weaving a tapestry," to be more effective than metaphors *centred* on individualism individualistic frameworks. Specific cultural symbols, such as the Japanese concept of "kintsugi" (repairing pottery with gold), were successfully used to convey resilience and acceptance of imperfections. Conversely, instances of metaphor misinterpretation were reported as a challenge when cultural differences were not fully considered, underscoring the importance of therapist sensitivity.

3. Impact on Client Outcomes: The use of metaphors was associated with significant therapeutic benefits:

- *Cognitive Flexibility*: Clients were able to reframe negative thoughts and explore alternative perspectives. For example, the metaphor "leaves on a stream" helped clients practice mindfulness by

visualizing thoughts as transient and non-threatening.

- *Emotional Processing*: Metaphors provided a safe emotional distance for clients to explore difficult experiences. A client who likened anxiety to "quicksand" found empowerment in the metaphorical "branch" suggested by the therapist, symbolizing coping strategies.

- *Client Engagement*: Therapists reported higher levels of client involvement and insight when metaphors were incorporated into sessions. One therapist observed that a client's understanding of their perfectionism improved significantly after describing it as "climbing a mountain with no summit."

Conclusions

The present study elucidates the transformative capacity of metaphorical language within the therapeutic framework, positioning metaphors as pivotal instruments in facilitating cognitive restructuring, emotional processing, and psychological flexibility. By transcending their linguistic function, metaphors emerge as dynamic cognitive tools that catalyse introspection and promote psychic transformation, offering clients a medium to access, articulate, and reframe complex emotional experiences.

The integrative analysis underscores the dual function of metaphors: as conceptual bridges linking abstract psychological constructs with concrete, culturally resonant imagery, and as narrative frameworks that enable a more nuanced exploration of emotional and cognitive states. This duality underscores the therapeutic potency of metaphors in fostering both insight and emotional regulation, particularly when metaphors are strategically aligned with clients' personal narratives and sociocultural contexts.

The study further reveals that the effectiveness of metaphors is inextricably linked to their contextual relevance and cultural resonance. Culturally anchored metaphors, such as the Japanese concept of 'kintsugi' or the cycling analogy to il-

lustrate resilience, emerged as potent therapeutic vehicles, enhancing client engagement and fostering a deeper therapeutic alliance. This culturally attuned approach not only augments therapeutic efficacy but also cultivates a more empathetic and connected therapeutic space.

Moreover, the integration of metaphors in therapeutic discourse not only facilitates cognitive restructuring but also promotes experiential learning, allowing clients to engage with therapeutic content in a more embodied and impactful manner. This experiential dimension amplifies the therapeutic impact of metaphors, rendering them powerful vehicles for challenging maladaptive thought patterns, reframing negative

cognitions, and cultivating more adaptive psychological schemas.

The study underscores the necessity for a deliberate and culturally sensitive application of metaphors within psychotherapeutic practice. The strategic selection and adaptation of metaphors, guided by the client's unique narrative and cultural context, can significantly amplify therapeutic outcomes, fostering deeper emotional processing and cognitive transformation. Recommendations for clinical practice include the development of a diversified repertoire of metaphors, the ongoing assessment of their contextual effectiveness, and the integration of culturally resonant imagery to optimize therapeutic impact.

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