

Counseling Case Formulation as Metaphor

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AUTHOR NOTE

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### Abstract

Case formulation is the rhetorical centerpiece of counseling. Case formulation arises from empirical assessment and directs evidence-based intervention. Case formulation emanates from an epistemology that is enlivened in an arcane rhetoric. Case formulation speaks to ontology of life and an axiology for living a good life. Case formulation is defined by and concomitantly defines the counselor. In the interpersonal dynamic of counseling, the counselor cannot be any other than the one who conceptualizes the life of the other—the client. The counselor’s rhetoric is an aesthetic form found within a very specific discourse that construes the mental life of the client and ipso facto, the counselor. For it is in the conceptualization of the case that the counselor is revealed, consciously or unconsciously, through the rhetoric used to objectify the life of another. Here we focus on the professional practice of *case formulation* as a highly specialized aesthetic of counseling practice.

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## Introduction

There are different definitions and models of case formulation. In a practical sense, case formulation is a selective summary of the data gleaned during interviews with a client. It is a selective process in the sense that the practitioner decides—consciously or unconsciously—which data are more relevant amidst the volumes that may issue forth as the narrative of a life. More than just a selective summary, however, is case formulation’s pragmatic qualities as a proto-theory of the person and presenting problem before the counselor. It is pragmatic theorization in the sense that its explanatory power is assumed valid until otherwise recast in light of new evidence (James, 1907/2000). A case formulation is “proto” because it can never assume the status of a scientific theory per se with all of the attendant capacity for generalization beyond the case in and of itself as a  $N = 1$  study; however, it is redeemed by the quality of falsifiability (Popper, 1935/2005) because it can be subject to logically derived empirical tests and be found demonstrably incorrect.

What is produced as a proto-theory for any one client’s presenting problem, by way of case formulation, is a working model for the practitioner’s actions in counseling.

Psychotherapy case formulation is a process for developing a hypothesis about, and a plan to address, the causes, precipitants, and maintaining influences of a person’s psychological, inter-personal, and behavioral problems in the context of that individual’s culture and environment. As a hypothesis, a case formulation is the therapist’s best account of the client’s problems: why the

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client is experiencing them, what precipitates symptom onset, and why symptoms continue to occur instead of resolving. (Eells, 2015, p. 16)

Eell's definition captures the notion of formulation as both a process (i.e., developing hypotheses and plans) and product (i.e., a hypothesis *per se*). It is more than a diagnostic account, however; it is a plan for action presumably designed on the basis of some foregoing expert knowledge and skill as to what is the most effective thing to do to resolve the client's presenting problem.

The term *hypothesis* used here reveals case formulation's roots in the logic of a scientific method (Popper, 1935/2005) whereby the hypotheses drawn from the proto-theory are put to empirical test by a trial-and-error process of engaging in actions played out by the counselor and the client so as to bring about change—cognitive, behavioral, or emotional. Where the counseling actions fall flat without effect, the hypothesis is abandoned (or, more formally put: rejected); where the actions produce change that is positive, the proto-theory is affirmed by retaining the hypothesis as a veridical assumption. This logic is a variant of the hypothetico-deductive method associated with the doctrine of falsifiability. Although there are different expressions of this scientific thinking in the *scientist-practitioner* and *practitioner-scholar* models (Stoltenberg et al., 2000) both retain a pragmatic (James, 1907/2000) empirical attitude toward intervention and regard for evidence-based practice. Thus, the mindset of the counselor is empirical—or at least it is meant to be so.

Counseling would not be counseling without the counselor having some conceptualization of the case in front of him. Beyond each case, counselors construct their own personal epistemology that facilitates the construction of proto-theories.

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Their epistemologies accrete what is deemed evidence, case by case, experience by experience, reflection by reflection, and treat their own unique ways of knowing, doing—an *epistemology of the practitioner* (Polkinghorne, 1992). Where the practitioner's epistemology loses its scientific quality is when the practitioner inducts conclusions on the basis of the evidence before him that are consistent with his proto-theory, rather than deducts conclusions that are derived from a genuine attempt to falsify the theory. In this way, counselors are susceptible to *confirmation bias* (Nickerson, 1998) and may become trapped in their own rhetoric in attempts to prove a proto-theory true. Thus, counselor's rhetoric must be subject to analysis to determine how its logic and vocabulary constrains their thinking into an inductive defense of a proto-theory.

### **Where There is Rhetoric There is Metaphor**

The very first words uttered between the counselor and client at upon that moment of meeting in psychological space between them are the first in the narrative stream that is rendered into a case formulation. Yet, even before words are spoken, the counselor is already primed to hear and speak words, key phrases, idioms, and expressions that are to be deployed in the process of formulation because he is already informed by his proto-theory.

When formulating a case, a counselor is ineluctably in her own discourse and cannot think about his client outside vocabulary and conventions of that discourse. A case cannot be formulated in any other discourse than that which is specific to case formulation, namely: psychology, psychotherapy, and counseling. This discourse comes with its vocabulary that is meaningful only to those who speak it with the facility of an expert. Any given word of that discourse is most meaningful

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within the parameters of that discourse, and changes when used in any other. The word “obsession”, for example, means something quite knowable and known to a psychologist as dysfunctional cognition, whereas it may mean something quite different to another profession or person not privy to the connotative meanings taken for granted by those on the inside of a discourse.

To the uninformed layperson, the experience of reading a case conceptualization may be similar to that of a first year student reading an advanced textbook about statistics. They will comprehend enough of the headline material to guess what is being conveyed in the narrative but there are specifically meaningful parts that are impenetrable. Case conceptualizations can be peppered with key terms meaningful only to the informed reader (e.g., obsession).

Thus, the rhetoric of case conceptualization is an articulation of an exclusive language of a closed/discourse community (Swales, 1990) that assume certain epistemological perspectives, such as post-positivist, social constructionist, or critical/ideological (McIlveen, 2009). The key to unlock the codex of their language is *conceptual metaphor* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which we introduce here as the foundation of a new research method for research into case conceptualization.

Consider Freud’s (1915/1991) classical model of mind and its three components: conscious, pre-conscious, and unconscious. One may better comprehend this model through a conceptual metaphor: mind is an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg is seen clearly rising above the surface of the water the bulk remains beneath the surface of the water, deep below, and unseen in the dark watery depths. Rather than eluding to qualities of an iceberg that may be comparable to the human mind through simile, here, the metaphor juxtaposes the two concepts to evoke

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something quite emphatic using knowledge of the target domain of the mind with that of the source domain of an iceberg. Rather than comprehend the mind in abstruse terms, conceptual metaphor better enables thinking about and talking about the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious minds using words associated with the iceberg (e.g., “above the surface”, “deep below”, “dark”, and “depths”).

Consider the language used to formulate the Case K, the 17-year-old who had just graduated from high school and decided to enrol in college because “a friend of mine thought it would be a good idea” (Brown, 2002, p. 25). This young man has no clear goals for a career apart from something that involves computers, lots of money, perhaps architecture, and professional skateboarding. Below is an excerpt from the case formulation by Savickas (2002):

K evinces the *avoidant* style in his emotional *approach to coping*, .... The career theme interview *reveals* a vocational self-concept that portrays someone who is *on the move* and likes to learn. His *line of movement* seems to *go from* being scared to being excited. His choice of role models indicates that he wants to *develop from* procrastinating and *moving hesitantly to* being an *initiator of* activity. He wants to *launch* new projects and even *lead*, yet also wants a partner available to provide reassurance and structure. His competence at self-knowledge and occupational information appears weak, and he now uses an intuitive decision-making style. In counseling, I would invite K to *stop skating* across the top of life. I would encourage him to *take hold, to explore* other ways to *move*—ways that use his talents and gratify his needs. The first *goal* would be to help him *take initiative*... [italic font added] (p. 194-195).

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The words in italic font shown in this excerpt have meaningfulness in figurative notions of change and motion (e.g., Purposes are Destinations', 'Difficulties are Impediments to Motion) that represent the therapists aims for K to use literal movement efficiently and effectively, so that he is "more courageous in moving forward in life" (p. 196).

Let us hear from Savickas once again when he formulates the Case E, a 20-year-old student at university where she is studying history and religion, and wanting to refine her career plan to focus on specific occupations. Savickas (2002) states,

She wants *to move from* her preoccupation with feeling sad about *being left out* of "a man's world" to *moving to* an occupation in which she can enact her compassionate vision, be a pioneer, work for change, and yet *balance* other life roles and keep stress low. To do so she needs *to turn* her tension into intention. She is conflicted about *staying versus going*. *Staying put* in a traditional role makes her depressed, but *running off* in a pioneer role scares the people who care for her, so for now *she stays put*. (p. 196)

In both case, Savickas uses words, specifically verb part-of-speech, associated with motion reflecting a source-path-goal image schema or pre-conceptual structuring (Johnson, 1987).

Motion is very much associated with the metaphorical conceptualization of a journey, a prototypical example of a conceptual metaphor from Lakoff (1987, p. 275), that is representative of the conceptualization of a career. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue for the pervasiveness of the journey metaphor in people's everyday communication:

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Our understanding of life as a journey uses our knowledge about journeys. All journeys involve travellers, paths travelled, places where we start, and places where we have been. Some journeys are purposeful and have destinations that we set out for, while others may involve wandering without any destination in mind, consciously or more likely unconsciously, a correspondence between a traveler and person living life, the road traveled and the 'course' of a lifetime, a starting point and a time of birth, and so on. (p. 66)

Are the words used by Savickas in his case formulation representative of a schema he used to understand the data about the case and then communicate that understanding in terms readily understood by the reader? We suggest that the use of these words is not mere convenience of expression; instead, we suggest that these words hold much greater import that pertains to thinking through conceptual metaphor.

A definitive feature of conceptual metaphor is that it allows for the comprehension of one object in terms of another, such as an iceberg for mind. In their conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), Lakoff and Johnson (1980) categorize two important features of conceptual metaphor as the SOURCE domain and TARGET domain. The source domain of knowledge is used as the referent object (e.g., iceberg) in order to understand the target object (e.g., mind). It is commonplace for people to think of one thing in terms of another, and the notion of transfer between SOURCE domain and TARGET domain captures this natural thinking in natural language-in-use.

In CMT, Lakoff and Johnson argue that people think and talk in metaphors that are representative of concepts. Moreover, metaphors enable people to communicate abstract ideas with one another, to share knowledge and experiences,

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and arrive at common understandings. Accordingly, the conceptual metaphors and vocabulary of case conceptualizations enable the discourse community of career practitioners to efficiently communicate quite specific and meaningful ideas with one another without recourse to long and complicated explanations. In this way, conceptual metaphor acts as special code that is expressed and understood in clinical shorthand.

We hasten to clarify the distinction between conceptual metaphor and the linguistic device, simile. Conceptual metaphor and simile are ostensibly similar in that one object is used to comprehend another object; however, the definitive difference is that simile involves a comparison (e.g., career is *like* a journey; mind is *like* an iceberg) that serves to describe affordances of an object much where one descriptively complements the other, but one is not given as the other (e.g., career is a journey; mind is an iceberg). The literal difference in words—“is like” and “is”—is not so relevant. What matters most is that the words of conceptual metaphor are presented as if the relation between the two words is unequivocal and absolute: mind is an iceberg is an emphatic statement. Thus, it may be more meaningful to state that “Freud is a giant” as distinct from the simile, “Freud is like a giant”, to conceptualize his profound impact on intellectual disciplines and clinical professions.

Inasmuch a cognitive framework for case conceptualization, conceptual metaphor it is also a limitation. Just as we assert that a counselor conceptualizations are limited to the discourse in which clinical vocabulary and conventions are deemed meaningful, it is likewise constraining to contemplate and talk about a case through any given conceptual metaphor. If mind is an iceberg, then all one can ever know about mind is its watery world of hydraulic dynamics. If, however, one uses an

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alternative conceptual metaphor then new vistas are opened. For example, Inkson's (2004) nine metaphors of career (as inheritance, construction, cycle, matching, journey, encounters and relationships, roles, resource, and story) are potentially productive as conceptual metaphors.

What is unknown is to what extent conceptual metaphors are typically used in counseling practice and, moreover, how their application to case formulation enhances, yet concomitantly limits, the meaningfulness of any given case formulation.

### **Metaphor Identification Procedure**

The retrospective analysis of case material and experts' case formulations is accepted in the field as a research method to discern theoretical and technical developments (e.g., Blustein et al., 2001; Whiston, Lindeman, Rahardja, & Reed, 2005). Using consensual qualitative research, Whiston et al. identified themes within the experts' opinions: theoretical orientation, helping skills, assessment, career-specific intervention, information and resources, social-contextual factors, and relational aspects. We extend this line of research by demonstrating a research method that uses similar data sources as these methods but one that provides an entirely different perspective on the rhetoric of case formulation.

Case formulation is a structured narrative of description and evaluation that is motivated and likewise constrained by the frequent use of metaphor. Metaphoric language acts as a framework for interaction between practitioner and client because it makes more complex or abstract phenomena more tangible or concrete.

Significantly, metaphor is a socially situated phenomenon that is expressed through cultural, educational, and historical contexts of understanding (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Gibbs Jr., 2008; Kövecses, 2005). The identification of key metaphors used in

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career counseling can reveal the personal lens of interlocutors and their predilection for or image of career that structure their understanding ultimately derived from their theoretical orientation. To identify linguistic instantiations of metaphor, the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) (Steen et al., 2010) put forward in this paper. MIPVU is an extension of the MIP procedure developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) who, as a group of metaphor scholars, came together over a period of years to construct a systematic and explicit method of annotation that would reliably identify potentially metaphoric expressions in talk and text. Situated conceptualizations (i.e., discourse situation-specific occurrences) of linguistic units are analyzed for meaning assisted by their behavior in context from natural language data. Surface realizations can in turn be examined for possible mappings from SOURCE to TARGET domains or blending of conceptual domains. The claim made by Steen et al. (2010) is that “all words that can be related to metaphor in this way could in theory be candidates for the cognitive cross-domain mapping by language users when they produce or comprehend language” (p. 13).

MIPVU provides an effective tool for determining the metaphoricity of a word, or phrasal verb, in its linguistic context of use. Most metaphorical language use constitutes indirect meaning by comparison in discourse. For instance, take the first sentence in the Savickas’ (2002) vignette: “K evinces the avoidant style in his emotional *approach to coping, ....*” Here, the noun Part-of-Speech (POS) *approach* can be argued to be metaphorical language use in this situated context because the basic meaning taken from the McMillan dictionary of a path or road that leads to a place can be compared and contrasted with the contextual meaning of a particular way of thinking about or dealing with something. The word *approach* involves indirect

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meaning by comparison and would be marked as a metaphor-related word (MRW) according to MIPVU.

Although most metaphorically used words are typically indirectly used (Steen, et al. 2010), cross-domain mappings can surface or be triggered by an alien referent. Consider, for example, the sentence taken from the Savickas (2002) vignette 1: “In, counseling, I would invite K to stop *skating across the top of life*. The italics highlight a topic shift from the domain of career to that of sport, specifically skating.” Because one can imagine the process of skating on blades across ice or perhaps on wheels along a path, one can understand the experiential comparison to the approach of K to life and more specifically career. The comparison of K to a skater and life/career to a surface of ice invites a mapping between these two contrastive domains of knowledge. Although the mapping encompasses a length of text rather than a single linguistic unit, the MIPVU procedure facilitates the annotation of the more common indirect conceptualizations along with the less frequent topically incongruous instances that are expressed directly or even deliberately affords conscious metaphorical cognition.

MIPVU involves six procedural phases for manual annotation: (1) read the whole text, (2) establish lexical units, (3) establish contextual meaning of the lexical unit, (4) determine if there is a more basic meaning, (5) decide if the basic and the contextual meaning can be contrasted but understood by comparison, and (6) mark the lexical unit as metaphoric if the answer is affirmative. Basic and contextual meaning are determined through the prescribed use of a corpus-based dictionary based on the World English corpus such as the McMillan dictionary. Identification of linguistic instantiations is the goal of the procedure and the abstinence from “precise conceptual

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analysis is in fact a sound and productive methodological strategy that yields better linguistic data, which, in turn, can be used for relatively independent conceptual research” (Steen, et al., 2010, p. 10).

For purposes of demonstration, the MIPVU was applied to two vignettes taken from Savickas (2002). The results show that conventional, non-deliberate metaphor are most often used in the case conceptualizations with manner-of-motion or agentive verbs evidenced in the figurative motivation of the JOURNEY metaphor for a cognitive schema of source-path-goal. Motion refers to the direction of movement (e.g., go from, to, across, into) and in a satellite-framed language such as English, particles are used to indicate the path of motion, for instance in vignette (1): His line of movement seems to *go from* being scared *to* being excited; and (2): To do so she needs *to turn* her tension *into* intention. Composing the case formulation, the practitioner most frequently used verb POS MRW semantically related to the notion of movement be that location, travel, or transport in the linguistic forms of *explore, go, launch, move* and *moving*, and *turn* as well as the prepositions *in, into, on, out, and to*. Other MRW with less explicit semantic relations to movement in the context of the text were *develop, help, lead, makes, reveals, take, and balance*. The identified MRW analyzed in the vignettes invite an association of a physical sense meaning (i.e., a journey) to frame a more abstract idea of career conceptualization, as in examples (1) to (4):

- (1) I would encourage him *to take* hold, *to explore* other ways *to move*—ways that use his talents and gratify his needs.
- (2) He wants to *launch* new projects and even *lead* ...
- (3) She wants *to move from* her preoccupation with feeling sad about being left *out* of “a man’s world” to *moving to* an occupation ...

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(4) To do so she needs *to turn* her tension *into* intention.

Albeit a brief example of MIPVU, it is evident that it reveals a more informative analysis of metaphoric language in case conceptualization.

### **Applications to Teaching**

The pedagogical utility of the MIPVU are significant. Current approaches to training in counseling, such as audiovisual recording sessions, reflections on what transpired in sessions, and supervision, and so on, are valuable teaching methods. We suggest that MIPVU can be used as a new teaching method whereby counselors explore their transcripts in search for metaphors that both enhance and limit their conceptualization of the cases and recommendations for interventions. Reformulating cases using different metaphors may not only widen a student's perspective of a case, so as to minimize cognitive bias, but also improve the specificity of interventions needed by the a client. Furthermore, addressing countertransference may be somewhat less confronting for a student when reflections are discussed in terms of metaphors. Entering into difficult conversations about past experiences or patterns of behavior that seem to unconsciously influence a student's counseling may be eased somewhat if the conversation is initially focused on the metaphors that the student consistently uses in counseling.

### **Conceptual Implications and Future Research**

Here we express a critical point that extends from the stance that counselors who perform career counseling and life designing, must engage in an ethic of reflexivity (McIlveen, 2015b) and that the distance between psychotherapy and career counseling, both conceptually and pragmatically, is not so far (McIlveen, 2015a). For example, qualitative analyses of career counseling case formulations reveal experts'

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emphasis on counseling activities traditionally associated with psychotherapy (Whiston et al., 2005), such as the dynamics of relationships (Blustein et al., 2001). Common to both psychotherapy and career counseling is the practice of case conceptualization, which may vary in form and terminology; but, ultimately, they share common root metaphors (Lyddon, 1989) that guide their practitioners' conceptualization of cases. Using metaphor analysis may well prove an informative approach to investigate the presumed differences between psychotherapy and career counseling by focusing on the language of counseling and case conceptualization.

### **Conclusion**

Here we have reformulated case formulation in terms of metaphor. Producing an authentic and credible story about a person within the limits of a few pages seems like an impossibility, especially given the many and varied biographies that may capture myriad stories about a person's life. There is a need for a conceptual shorthand that, like a picture, says a thousand words. From the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory, counselors think about and talk about their clients using metaphoric language. To capture a person's life in counseling may necessitate thinking in metaphor because literal description may not suffice as a way to meaningfully render a life in words. Moreover, it may not be possible to do otherwise for metaphor represents thinking itself. Thus, we recommend that metaphor be given greater prominence in counseling theory and practice, to make it explicitly known and utilized. Doing so will enhance empathic communication between counselor and client, and among counselors sharing their case formulations with one another.

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