

**G. Popova**, PhD in psychology, professor on the Psychology and Pedagogy faculty of Kharkiv National Technical University

**N. Miloradova**, PhD in psychology, professor on the Psychology and Pedagogy faculty of Kharkiv National University of Internal Affairs

### **Psychological mechanisms of the use of metaphoric associative cards in individual counseling**

**Abstract.** The authors analyzed the main psychological mechanisms of metaphoric associative cards' influence: projection, identification, metaphor, associations, insight, figure and ground; in particular, the study of the unconscious through the use of metaphoric associative cards as compared to other methods. Levels of immersion into the inner world of the person using the cards are described.

**Keywords:** metaphoric associative cards, projection, identification, metaphor, associations, insight, figure and ground, counseling.

**Introduction.** A new, unique tool has been created over the past three decades and has been quickly adopted by counselors, psychotherapists, social workers, business coaches, and coaches who use it for both individual and group work with clients. It is "metaphoric associative cards" (MAC). The first deck of the seventeen decks of MAC cards was "OH Cards," which appeared in Germany in 1985. Their appearance was associated with the names of the artist Ely Raman, psychotherapist Joe Schlichter, and publisher Moritz Egetmeyer.

Metaphoric associative cards are pictures the size of playing cards, with no fixed persistent values or interpretations, allowing the obtaining of necessary information for qualitative work with the client in a very short period of time. They are handy tools for group and individual work and can be used with adults and children. The cards are international and therefore are perceived by representatives of different cultures and are suitable for working with clients of different sex, age, and social status. Use of this tool provides the ability to work simultaneously within the emotional, mental, and physical spheres of the client, creating a secure interaction environment and a free, non-judgmental exchange of ideas. Cards are distributed fairly quickly and are actively used by specialists

from different countries. Therefore, an understanding of the theoretical foundations of MAC, summarizing the experience of practical applications of the cards in individual and group psychological work, is relevant.

**Review of publications.** Nowadays, we may talk about the successful use of this psychological counseling tool in Russia (L. Talpis, N. Nelidov, A. Kopytin, etc.), Belarus (A. Gorobchenko, L. Stepanova ), Ukraine (E. Morozovovskaya, R. Tkach, B. Inzhyr, G. Popov, N. Miloradova, etc.). The promotion of cards was contributed to by the appearance on the market of Ukrainian psychological tools such as decks by Eve Morozovskoj (“To be. To act. To possess,” “Facebook,” “Hedgehog’s Tales,” and others) and the cards of Razida Tkach (Slavonic tales, such as “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” “The Frog Princess,” “The Tale of Emel Fool”) [3,6,7,9].

Professionals working with cards in different countries (O. Ayalon, M. Egetmeyer, L. Moshinskaya, L. Talpis, A. Gorobchenko, L. Stepanova, E. Morozovskaya, A. Pushkov, G. Popov, N. Miloradova, et al.) emphasize that metaphoric associative cards have a certain theoretical basis. L. Stepanova indicates in her publication that the “action” of the cards is based on certain psychological approaches: psychoanalytics, the client-centered approach of Carl Rogers, the Gestalt approach of F. Perls, NLP, etc. [9]. The essence of the psychological mechanisms of the cards’ action is connected with such phenomena as “projection,” “identification,” “metaphor,” “association,” “insight,” “figure and ground,” “archetypes,” “game,” “picture of the world,” and some others.

**The aim of this article.** The aim of this article is to analyze the psychological mechanisms and patterns on which to base the possibility of using MAC in individual counseling. It is necessary to clarify the “procedure” part of the cards’ use.

**The main material.** Metaphoric associative cards work as a consulting tool precisely because patterns of the personality’s functioning associated with the experience of its surrounding reality and, above all, its relations with the social environment, become obvious in the process of counseling. Due to the selectivity of perception, apperception, and projection effects, the client sees in the picture of the card exactly what fits his experiences, related to current life situations and outlooks on life, past experience, and personal injury.

Cards can be viewed as multimodal stimulation that causes a diversity of client associations: on one hand, there are visuals; on the other hand, there is narrative practice, which is the source of subsequent interventions in the process of counseling.

Narrative therapy is based on the idea that a person's identity (the idea of who I am) is constructed in the form of stories (narratives). During narrative practice, meanings, values and the intentions of dreams and opportunities are clarified, along with the history of their origin and development. As a result, a "safe area identity" is formed in a person; he becomes able to take a look at his life from a resource position, distancing from direct (often traumatic) experiences, and make an informed choice, changing his life in the desired direction.

Cards are based on the use of the phenomenon of projection (Latin *projection* – throwing), which is understood within psychoanalytic theory as a projection of the unconscious. Projection as a psychological concept was first described by Sigmund Freud, who believed that neuroses arise when the psyche cannot master internal sexual arousal, and then there is a projection (throwing) of this excitation to the outside world [5].

G. Murray, an author of the first study of personality projective techniques (TAT), considered projection as the natural tendency of people to act on their needs, interests, and whole mental organization. L. Frank points out that incentives used in projective techniques are not strictly unambiguous and allow for different interpretations. Stimulus makes sense for the subject not only because of its objective content, but, primarily, due to the personal meaning given to it under testing as the subject reacts according to their own thoughts and feelings. L. Frank marked out common signs of projective techniques:

1. uncertainty, ambiguity of incentives used;
2. no limitations in choosing an answer;
3. the lack of evaluating test responses as "correct" or "wrong" [2].

Known projective techniques (H. Rorschach, G. Murray, C. Rosenzweig, etc.) for the investigation of the unconscious aim to detect deeply repressed, unconscious factors that make up the basis of the dynamic personality. So the content of the unconscious can be found by projecting the mixed incentives, interpretations of stories or pictures. These methods are used to reduce the psychological defenses of personality. Projective techniques successfully complete psychometric techniques, allowing a glimpse into what is most deeply hidden that slips through when using traditional methods of investigation.

Sometimes this genre of cards is called “projective.” As we can see, MAC has features of projective methods of personality study, but is not a validated procedure as a result of which a "psychological diagnosis" is made.

That the client assigns the image on the card a certain sense is a form of projection of his unconscious. The unconscious is considered to be the accumulation of experiences, memories, and repressed emotions. An important property of the unconscious personality is its activity, its ability to conjure up such internal processes and forces that can lead to either creative activities or negative activity that can be devastating for the individual himself and for the people around him [5]. Cards help identify behavioral patterns and repressed emotions. Each new view of a card can bring to life a new meaning. In this context, cards are used as a safe tool for the personal projections necessary in the process of counseling.

Identification is another important psychological mechanism that underlies the action of MAC counseling techniques. The identification process promotes the involvement of the client in a conversation based on the discussion of the picture. The term “identification” comes from the Latin word *identificare*. In most Russian and Western psychological works, identification is defined as assimilation with anyone or anything, in two aspects:

- pattern recognition – identification of the object on several grounds, assignment of an object to a particular class of objects;
- identification with anyone or anything on a personal level.

Both of these processes are carried out during application of MAC: the client recognizes images according to his own view of the world and identifies himself with the “hero” or an object on the card. A set of associations appears to the client on the basis of identification and projection about the pictures and these associations are associated with the internal world of the individual, with his unconscious parts. There are the following levels of such an immersion associated with the stages of the consultative process:

- understanding the image (identification of images);
- recognition of related problems in images (dissociated identification of problems);
- understanding of the problems, their parts, causes, and possible ways to resolve them on a metaphoric level (structuring and understanding of personal problems);

- transfer of metaphoric work results to life (decision on the level of real life). This decision often occurs suddenly (seemingly abstract topics are talked about regarding the pictures) and it is perceived as a magical message of the unconscious, as an inspiration – a sudden insight.

The associations that arise in clients while looking at the pictures serve as a mechanism of identification.

The method of association in using MAC is compared to the method of free association proposed by Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung's method of associative experiment for verifying the action of the cards as a consulting tool.

Freud offered clients the opportunity to speak freely about what came to mind. On the basis of the principle of dominance, free association (Latin *associare* – to attach) is not necessarily free, and necessarily leads to significant statements on the problematic topic (the disease locus). Freud used a number of concepts, such as “chain of associations,” “thread of associations,” “progress or line of associations,” to describe the way of so-called “free associations” [5].

Jung developed an experimental method for the detection of personal complexes by examining the associations or relationships that seem odd at first sight. According to Jung, his studies of complexes and their indicators fully confirmed the existence of unconscious, repressed material, as well as seemingly completely forgotten traumatic experiences (as had been discovered by Freud). Jung's “associative experiment” (Jung, S., 1906) is a projective psychological experimental methodology used by him to disclose affective complexes inherent in humans. The essence of the experiment is connected with an investigation of the latent period of verbal reaction-associations to word-stimulus. According to the experiment, the latent time of reactions to “emotionally charged words” increases.

Numerous variants of the associative experiment depend on the nature of the stimulus and on variations in the instructions. Freud applied his method of free association primarily to explore the patient's personal unconscious; Jung's interest in the complexes led to his discovery of the archetypes found in the collective unconscious [5].

A comparison of these methods according to certain criteria is given in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Comparative characteristics of associative methods  
for investigating the client's inner world

| <b>The essence of the associative method</b>  | <b>Author's starting position</b>  | <b>Psychological mechanism of the method</b>  | <b>Result</b>   |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Method of free association:</b> the client speaks freely during the session about what comes to mind.  | Offered by Sigmund Freud on the basis of ideas about the functioning of the unconscious and defensive mechanisms.  | Associations are managed by the principle of the dominant painful focus in the unconscious: What "hurts" is talked about.   | Detection of hidden content of personality's unconscious; growth of client's self-knowledge, insight.   |
| <b>Associative experiment:</b> the subject is asked to answer any word that comes to his mind as quickly as possible in response to a set of stimulus words.  | Offered simultaneously by C.G. Jung, M. Wertheimer, and D. Klein for investigation of personality's motivation and the detection of meaningful experiences and complexes.  | Repressed, hidden desires and "affective complexes" of the subject can be detected by his reactions to incentives. Appearing associations are registered according to their type, frequency of homogeneity, the time between stimulus and response. Non-verbal manifestations are also recorded (behavioral and physiological reactions). | Helps in the detection of significant areas of experiences and complexes. This method captures the latent content, primarily of significant experiences.  |
| <b>Metaphoric associative cards:</b> Cards can be used to help the client compose free narrative about the picture, or as a more narrowly focused, structured technique to produce client associations for selected images. | Offered by a collaboration of E. Raman, with J. Schlichter and M. Egetmeyer (1985). Later explored by psychologists from different countries and research directions. Based on projections of unconscious phenomena, identification, metaphoricity of images (archetypes). | Multimodal sensory stimulation, metaphorical images, associative problems research, dissociation from problems, identification with characters on the cards, movement into reality.   | Helps establish psychological contact, weaken defenses, bypass resistance reactions. Leads to insights, awareness of repressed information, changing of emotional states, reassessment of goals and ways to overcome, refining of the picture of the world. |

Thus, MAC has qualities regarding stimulation of associations and methods of working with associations that compare to the described analytical methods of investigation of the unconscious:

- In contrast to the method of collective associations, MAC allows quicker and more targeted obtaining of information about the contents of the client's unconscious;
- In contrast to associative experiment, MAC can not only diagnose the hidden affect, but also work with it.
- MAC is a tool that allows the use of psychoanalytical ideas, as well as many other ideas (Gestalt, NLP, cognitive psychology, etc.).

The tasks of the psychologist-counselor, while working with MAC, are to observe, take into consideration, focus, and interpret the direction and “sign” of the client's associations (negative – positive), their width and depth on a specific meaningful image. Accordingly, the main instruments while working with the cards are certain communication techniques: motivating the “conversation with the card,” clarification, paraphrasing, listening, summarizing, asking questions of different types depending on the stage of immersion in a consultative process.

At each stage of counseling work with MAC, it is rational to use appropriate questions to encourage the client to associate (the step of identifying the images), assess and investigate problem characters (steps of problem identification and comprehension), and investigate ways for solving personal problems (decision point).

The title of the cards contains the word “metaphoric,” which points directly to another phenomenon whereby the cards do their work during counseling. Cloe Madanes writes: “All human behavior can be somehow represented in the language of analogies or metaphors on different levels of abstraction” [4]. Some part within us remains unknown and cannot be described by any conscious laws. This part contains the knowledge that much is actually possible. It has the resources, and the key to the main focus for this part is imagery or metaphor. Metaphor does not act directly, but it goes directly to the goal, and in the experience of it, people really live. It becomes the experience.

D. Trunov [10] highlighted the main functions that perform psycho-therapeutic metaphors (PTM) in counseling:

1. Expressive function. The client using the metaphor expresses difficult-to-verbalize experiences (mood, feelings, impressions, etc.). Successfully matched metaphor is “economical” because it saves time and words used for explanations.

2. Diagnostic function – the client’s image choices are determined by conscious and unconscious motives. This function is widely used in projective techniques. In transactional analysis, a favorite child’s fairy tale is interpreted as a metaphor to help reveal the life scenario of the patient [1].
3. Dissociating function – comprises the “realification” of the problem, and its exteriorization, i.e. “moving” the problem from the patient’s “internal field” to the “external field.” First, this allows the client to see the problem from outside it and find ways to solve it, and, second, it allows the psychotherapist to carry out a variety of therapeutic manipulations (e.g., Gestalt therapy techniques, NLP).
4. Explaining function – the symbolic replacement of abstract concepts by giving them “tangible” forms of perception, facilitating the assimilation of various psychological concepts.

Quite often the client is not ready to tell all about his “skeletons in the closet,” or cannot describe exactly what is happening to him. In these cases, we can work as if without content, asking the client to choose cards that metaphorically reflect the problem or condition, and then going beyond their description. Moreover, diagnostic possibilities are hidden in the composition of the card set and in the process of direct card selection by the client, subject to further descriptions and interpretations of the cards. The use of metaphoric cards is an economic (in terms of time and effort) and ecological (in terms of the client’s security) way of working with the client, adding variety to the options for psychotherapeutic tools [3].

The metaphorical imagery of MAC allows the client to perceive problems at a distance, dissociated, which decreases resistance and allows the bypassing of psychological defenses. The visual metaphors of the cards carry multiple opportunities to influence the inner world of the client; backed up by verbal elements, metaphors become even stronger. Metaphoric cards manifest both at the level of perception of the images by the client and at the level of dialogue with the psychologist: You can freely talk about the negative in the picture without linking it to yourself; you can compose stories about heroes, investigate their problems, search for ways out of difficult situations, etc.

Furthermore, based on the postulates of humanistic (Maslow, Rogers, V. Frankl, S. Buhler, R. May, and others) and positivist psychologists (M. Seligman) studying the traits and characteristics of human behavior that characterize satisfied, happy people who are not burdened with mental disorders, it can be argued that work with MAC is an integrative



approach for understanding the problem and the role of client and consultant in its resolution.

Based on the fact that each person has a resource within, Martin Seligman suggested working with the client to focus on positive emotions, a subjective sensation of happiness, optimism, vitality, sources of life satisfaction, and positive character traits, while working with the client and analyzing the social structures that promote happiness and development in order to solve personal problems. Based on this, working with MAC includes:

- support for the resources in the client himself;
- complete, deep attention by the client and to the client in absolute unity of active listening with each other;
- a focus that is not on finding a client's pathology, but on his strength, ability, capabilities, and inclinations;
- searching for resources to solve the problem or to cultivate resources and a new pattern of behavior from a small seed present in or sown in the client [8].

Our unconscious always knows the right thing to do, how to find a way out of the situation, and what choice to make; it is only necessary to learn to listen to it. Metaphoric associative cards, in this case, are an indispensable guide and assistant.

Working with cards is associated with the phenomenon of "insight." As a part of client-centered therapy, Rogers emphasized that insight incorporates several types of perception: the perception of relationships between previously known facts; the perception of all motives in terms of their natural interrelations (self-acceptance). Genuine insight includes a positive choice for those goals that will bring the greatest satisfaction to the client [5]. Cards help the client extend both vertically (e.g., in the hierarchy of significant emotions) and horizontally (analysis of problems related to different areas of functioning) his beliefs and knowledge about himself and his inner reality in order to harmonize them.

Obviously, the principle of the relationship between figure and ground from Gestalt therapy is applicable to the cards: the most significant events occupy a central place in the consciousness, forming a shape, with less important information retreating to form a background. F. Perls used this hypothesis to describe the functioning of the individual [5]. With respect to MAC, based on the figure and background patterns, no card has a specific or "correct" value. Only the person who draws the card may interpret its meaning, its sense: "The master of a card is the master of a history."

**Conclusions.** Thus, the important functions of cards in the process of counseling are:

- purposeful investigation of the internal space of the client, the problematic areas, with the help of the associations allocated to the images by the client;
- metaphoric interventions that help to identify ways and resources to overcome the problems.

The process of counseling with the help of MAC achieved effects such as: establishing trust; actualization of client's experiences; client self-revelation; establishing contact with inner parts of the personality; investigation of the client's values and motives; detection of repressed material; insight, reframing, problem structuring; search for solutions and resources; enrichment of personal meanings; expanding of world view; getting metaphorical feedback. These effects are possible on the basis of psychological phenomena, which are involved in MAC: projection, identification, association, insight of client, figure-ground allocation, dissociation from problems, reduction of defensive mechanisms, metaphoric impact.

Along with the well-founded understanding of the theoretical foundations of MAC use, there are practical algorithms of card use in individual and group work that are still unclear and insufficiently reasoned. Therefore, in the prospect of working towards "formalization" of MAC method, we see, firstly, the compilation of experiences of card use in individual counseling and, secondly, the algorithmization of techniques for individual work with MAC.

## Literature

[Editor's note: These citations are a rough translation from the original Russian article.]

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