Imagogenogram – a Binder in the Clients' Process of Exploration, Observation, Clarification, Resignification

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Abstract

Introduction: The Imagogenogram (M. Voicu) is a spatial, dynamic genogram, built with the help of cards with images of human figures, bringing together the connotations related to the actual working support (images chosen by the subjects as being similar to their families) with the basic idea of the genogram (evaluation of the family structure and functionality).

Objectives: Case studies aimed to highlight how this projective technique creates emotional reactions in clients and facilitates the psychotherapeutic process in terms of exploration, observation, clarification, resignification etc.

Methods: Imagogenograms were created by clients, using the metaphorical cards PERSONA (author Ely Raman) – pictures with human figures, adults and children and with 'relationships' (possible types of interactions) and PERSONITA (authors Ely Raman and Marina Lukyanova) – drawings with children's figures and ' relationships', symbolically represented), from OH Cards. The administration of the technique is simple: clients choose cards for their family members. The indication is that these are placed as the client feels. The portrait does not necessarily have to look physically like the represented person, but to remind the client something, a feeling, an interaction, a story. These images are a basis to start the process of exploration. It is important how the client chooses and places these images – their family.

Results: The Imagogenogram created provides many clues for both the therapist and the client. It is revealing how it connects clients with their family and helps them correlate present events with past interactions with family members. When they come in therapy, often enough clients are focused on the present, on the pain of the now, and sometimes it is difficult to initiate the journey into the past, exploring the broader context of life. The Imagogenogram provides the pretext of discussion and subsequent integration, being a very good binder in the process of exploring transgenerational patterns.

Conclusions: Those illustrated in front of the clients gain greater poignancy, become more present, more visible, easier to understand; the clients 'connect' with authentic people, being able to empathize and forgive, and eventually, liberate themselves and move on.

Keywords: Imagogenogram, transgenerational, spontaneous projections, emotions, connection, patterns, projective cards

I. Introduction

The therapeutic process involves provoking and reconstructing the client's life experiences through symbolic means, exploring and analyzing the experiences, thoughts and behaviors associated with the past experiences brought back to the present, as well as changing the perspective on the blocking situations, by stimulating the insights, through awareness and resignification, by activating one's resources in order to expand the cognitive, attitudinal, volitional, decision-making, emotional and relational areas, as the foundation of the process of personal development and problem solving.

Humanistic, existential and experiential psychotherapy are centered in the present, promote awareness of the "here and the now", spontaneity, creativity and authenticity, as self-healing and self-transforming resources. The therapist accompanies and stimulates the client's self-exploration process, helping them to become aware of and give meaning to personal events and states.

Starting from these premises, but also from the idea that projective methods contain the imaginative constructions of the person and bear the mark of their profound identity, the use of such a working technique seemed the best way to facilitate the labor of self-revelation and self-knowledge. This therapeutic approach also helps the process of identifying the client's problematic areas, the areas where there are imbalances and especially those where the intervention is needed.

The Imagogenogram (Voicu, 2008, 2009) represents such a method; it is a spatial, dynamic genogram, built with the help of cards with images (drawings) of human figures, bringing together the connotations related to the

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actual working support (images chosen by the subjects as being similar to their families), with the basic idea of the genogram (evaluation of the family structure, dynamics and functionality).

According to the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language (DEX), imago = 1. generic name for the adult stage of insects; 2. (psychoanalysis) it depicts the unconscious representation of a character with whom the subject has maintained relationships bearing affective values (the term was introduced by Jung).

II. Objectives

This article aims to promote a type of experiential diagnosis mediated symbolically, in a projective manner.

The novelty element the Imagogenogram brings is given by the fact that this projective technique gives the genogram warmth and emotion. Within it, by associating images with significant people in the client's life, spontaneous projections take place, which create emotional reactions in the client, facilitating the processes of exploration, observation, clarification, resignification etc.

Through the Imagogenogram, the client has the possibility to spatially re-create the family configuration as they represent it internally, for themselves, with 'family members' being placed at various distances from each other, the physical closeness/ distance corresponding to the emotional one. Cards can also be placed one on top of the other, depending on the family scenarios and transgenerational secrets, so relational patterns, family repetitions, elements of loyalty can be easily noticed.

Another great advantage of using the Imagogenogram is the possibility of moving the cards, as the psychotherapeutic analysis unfolds, so that we are not only talking about a narrated genogram, but about a lived experience, in the "here and now", as the client reveals their 'world' as they represent it, as a fruit of their perceptions, interpretations, memories and thoughts.

The therapist accompanies the clients in the process of understanding, forgiving and assuming responsibilities for their own life history, past, present, but also future, in a smooth, flowing endeavor, as one will be able to observe from the 3 case studies presented below.

III. Method

In the creation of the Imagogenogram any projection support with which one is familiar can be used. I use the PERSONA metaphorical cards (author Ely Raman – drawings with human figures, adults and children, and illustrations of 'relationships', types of possible interactions) and PERSONITA (authors Ely Raman and Marina Lukyanova – drawings with children's figures, as well as 'relationships', symbolically represented), from OH Cards Romania. The images from the PERSONA and PERSONITA metaphorical card sets were reproduced here with the consent of the publisher (OH Publishing, Moritz Egetmeyer, Germany, www.oh-cards.com).

The administration process is simple: the client chooses cards to represent their family members. The indication is that they place the images as they feel, unconsciously representing their family relations. The chosen cards may or may not necessarily resemble the family members' physical traits – the client is instructed to select the cards that remind them of someone in some way, in no particular order.

From these images the process of exploration begins.

As working methods we used the experiential ones, namely the creation of a liberating atmosphere, a warm permissive and tolerant space, allowing the expression of an empathic understanding, a therapeutic presence full of respect, unconditional acceptance, Rogerian techniques (openness, active listening, evaluation, reflection, "here and now" communication, without judgment and evaluation, reformulation, exploration, observation, awareness, clarification, rationalization, resignification), use of specific language in psychotherapy (questions for identification and analysis of generalizations, deformations, eliminations, presuppositions, situations such as mind-reading, cause-and-effect reasoning), use of normalization, empathic validation, metaphor, and psychoeducation.

As said, it bears importance how the client represents their images, how they are chosen and placed. Sometimes the clients select quickly all the family members, including themselves; sometimes they choose cautiously, one person at a time, talking about that person, re-living various past experiences and feelings, before selecting another image, for another person (or for the same person, now seen with other eyes); sometimes they ' forget' to pick a card for themselves... Some cards may overlap (they are hidden), or, as said, several cards are chosen for one person. Sometimes the clients don't know anything about a family member, but that person has a place in the family, and a blank card is chosen for them.

If the client picked one card but look for another, there is no intervention from the therapist, for not disturbing their inner process. If they put a card aside and are contemplating it, the therapist asks them about it. The therapist is allowed to ask again who a character is, if they forget – the Imagogenogram can be a complex structure.

All these aspects provide many clues for both the therapist and the client. It can be worked on the same Imagogenogram during several sessions – exploring, expanding or simplifying it. In this case, the pictures are kept aside, and in the next meeting the client is asked how he envisages to place them that day.

The exploration starts from what the client says. During the Imagogenogram session, within the analysis, the psychologist summarizes, clarifies, underlines the gains, points out the important, significant elements.

When they come in therapy, clients are often focused on the 'now', on the present problems, and sometimes it is difficult to enter the journey into the past, exploring the broader context of life. The Imagogenogram provides the pretext for the discussion and is a very useful tool in the process of exploring transgenerational patterns.

IV. Results – case studies

Case 1 – "He who loves, does not hurt!"

M., woman, 41 years old, married, 2 underage children.

The client came in therapy for problems in the couple. She was furious and wanted to find out if she should decide to divorce. "I don't know what to do!"

Following the conduction of the experiential psychodiagnosis, the following emerged:

Assumptions

Low self-esteem and defective way of relating to those around her – no one loved her, neither her mother, nor her husband, nor even she loved herself.

The need for connection with her mother – on the relational, emotional side the client was not in the adult, she was still a child.

Rejection of parental models and non-identification with them – problems with the roots: grandparents were like not existing, the father was somewhat present but not fully, as was the mother.

Client objectives: clarifying the relationship with the spouse in order to take a decision, either to remain in the relationship or to divorce.

Therapist objectives: clarifying the relationship with the husband; clarifying, connecting and recovering the relationship with the mother; improving self-esteem; diminishing old patterns and integrating new ones.

In order to be able to challenge the process of identifying one's life scenarios and transgenerational dynamics, we chose to proceed to the realization of the Imagogenogram by the client. This allowed to easily clarify and recover the relationship with her mother. From the way she initially chose the members of her family (the first chosen being actually friends of her parents), the client realized during the Imagogenogram sessions that she rejected her own family, while considering persons outside the family as being more significant to her.

The Imagogenogram allowed the client to relive her childhood from which she remembered that she spent a lot of time with her midwife (her mother's cousin), her husband and son (the first chosen by the client in the Imagogenogram). She described the woman as plump, cheerful, calm, without tantrums and quarrels, a strong person the others gravitated around. "When I was young I said I wanted to be like her". That is the exact opposite of the client's mother. The lady's husband was a cheerful, serene man who "loved, cuddled and comforted his wife". He as well was very fat. Their son, a year younger than the client, was slim, pampered by his maternal grandparents who raised him when he was little. She had not met them in a very long time.

Progressing with the Imagogenogram, the client added her father and with great difficulty her mother, which took a long time to identify among the images. Following the client's memories and thoughts, the Imagogenogram, through this unconscious representation, clarified the existence of problems in the relationship with her mother. Appearing the question where she was, she began to look at the images to add herself, but after many searches, was unable to find a representation of herself. She found and added her two boys. She recounted about her father and mother, their relationship and their interactions with her children. As she narrated these things, she placed herself opposite from her parents (bottom row, left), having placed her children in the space between (Figure 1).

During the next meeting she re-placed the images, putting her origin family, father and mother, then her children, and herself next to her father, this time. Her husband, but also the grandparents and other relatives, were again missing from the Imagogenogram, which led to the hypothesis that she lacked roots, which is also found in the fact that M. does not know herself yet, because she does not identify with the transgenerational pattern.

The discussions on these images revealed important aspects in the development of the client, during the sessions the position of the pictures changing as the client managed to clarify her relationship with the parents (Figure 2).

During the sessions she found many situations in which her mother showed her love, identified and gave a different meaning to the similarities between her and her mother, managing to connect with her mother. Currently the relationship with the mother is a very good one.
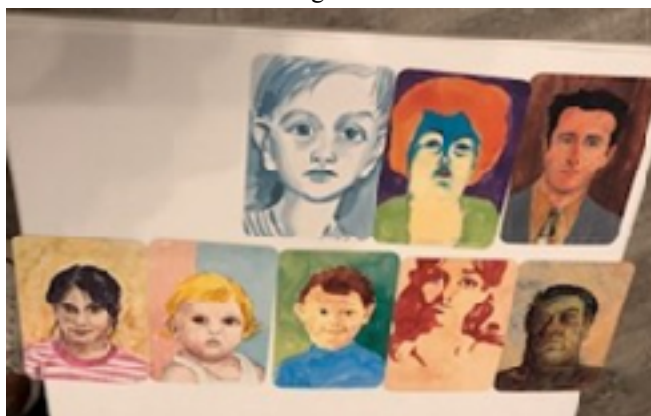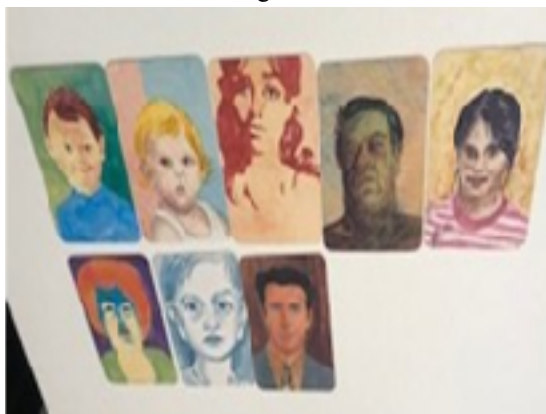
Figure 1

Figure 2

M. noticed the overlap between love, harshness and even abuse. She identified the pattern related to how love comes with pain and abuse, "love hurts". She understood that this pattern made her end up in the situation of being cheated on in order to be able to feel loved.

The progress made by the client during the meetings in which I used the Imagogenogram was significant, helping her move from the anger felt towards the mother and the inability to talk to her, to the moment when the client integrated the similarities (both physical and behavioral) with her and understood that the mother had always loved her in her way. This resignification helped her feel much better, feel more peaceful and, at the same time, clarify her relationship with her husband. She managed to understand the old patterns and integrate new ones.

Case 2 – "I am the core!"

L., 47 years old, divorced, mother of two sons, aged 27 and 24 years old.

The client came to the office for problems at work. She worked in a very important department. After a repeated change of management, the new superior reduced her duties without discussing with her. She felt humiliated and marginalized, affirming "My boss doesn't love me!".

Following the experiential psychodiagnosis, it emerged as a hypothesis that L. had a low self-esteem – she did not feel appreciated neither by her boss nor by her mother. There were also issues in dealing with authority.

Client objectives: clarifying the relationship with the boss – "I want to be sure that I was fair and just."

Therapist objectives: increasing self-esteem; diminishing use of old relational patterns and developing new ones; clarifying, repairing and ensuring a better connection with the family and, consequently, with the boss.

After a few sessions, in which L. described in great detail how the manager and colleagues have been interacting with her lately (the boss completely ignored her, her colleagues avoided her from fear of being seen by him), the dynamics at the office and her method of working in opposition to the expectations of the boss, we have identified issues in interacting with the authority and wanted to explore where they came from. I proposed the client to create her Imagogenogram. During the 3 meetings, spontaneous projections arose, that produced emotional reactions, which facilitated the processes of exploration, observation, clarification, resignification.

At the indication "choose cards for your family members", as soon as the client saw the cards, she rushed and picked the image of a 3-4 years old child. I invited her to tell me more about the image. "He's my eldest son (currently 27 years old), my first love. Although it is a black and white picture, the boy is sweet, he's looking over his shoulder, waiting to be cuddled, kissed."

Figure 3

Afterwards, she chose cards for her mother and father. She also added the maternal grandparents with whom they lived. Then at the natural question which image to choose for herself and where to place it, L. easily selected an image that looked like her mother, but young, and placed it next to her (Figure 3 – middle row, right). After the pictures were arranged, the client started to cry, looking at them. There was a strong insight. "Here is my whole life!" After stopping crying we started exploring each person and the dynamics between them. The whole session she sighed and spoke, then sighed again.

L. described her mother as very well groomed, beautiful, confident, strong. "I think she loves me, but she has a greater weakness for my brother" (she has a brother 2 years younger than her). She looks at the pictures again. At my question, what made her place her card next to her mother's, she again started to cry, saying that only then, looking at the pictures, she realized that she needed the attention and appreciation of her mother who was always dissatisfied with her. "I disappointed her! She expected I study to be a doctor, but I gave up studies after high school, got pregnant and got married. I went to the university later on, after my sons grew elder." I explored that context. The pregnancy was an ectopic one and it required surgery. "They accepted, but I didn't feel they were by my side. My dad didn't even come with me to the hospital. My mother told me that I embarrassed them. I felt ashamed. Their lack of love made me feel betrayed. That's when they allowed me to get married."

She was silent for a while then realized that her mother had treated her similarly as her boss.

She continued by telling stories about her grandparents. L. described her grandfather as tough, authoritarian, contained, a perfectionist. "Grandpa was the master." Her grandmother was a housewife, cooked food and took care of everyone. "Grandma was like mother goose, she kept the family together." "My mother was the beauty of the house because grandma was protecting her. When my mother came home from work, grandma wouldn't let her do anything. She was doing it all for her."

From the description of the client, it was possible to identify in her grandfather and grandmother the two forms of authority, the tough one and the good one. We looked at these dimensions together.

Observing the pattern related to love (love is expressed through the services we do for the ones we love), I explored with her what it meant and how it related to the fact that her work duties had been taken away from her.

In the first meeting in which I used the Imagogenogram she cried a lot. At the end she said it was very liberating. "I understood things I had never thought of before."

To the next meeting she came feeling much more relaxed. "I thought about all the choices I made last session, together and about each one in part." The Imagogenogram was completed (Figure 4) with her second son, the client's ex-husband (the sons' father) and her brother. She did not change the position of any image.

Figure 4

We discussed the fact that she has only then added the youngest son. Asking what her feelings were towards her two sons, the client replied that she loved them both very much, but that she realized that she was more connected with the elder one. I asked if this situation seemed familiar to her and immediately she replied "Like mom with me and my brother. I understood that by looking at these images." I accompanied L. in the endeavors of exploring, observing, clarifying, and resignifying the mother's behavior toward her and her brother. There were also interventions of psychoeducation, normalization and empathic validation.

Because the two sons in the Imagogenogram were represented as being much younger than in reality, we felt it was necessary to explore what happened to the two of them at those ages, if there were events related to the client at that time, or occurring to her when she was at a similar age to that of the boys in the cards. I could find out that the crucial event for the client when the eldest son was 3-4 years old was that her father-in-law died and they had to take the younger child to her parents, where he stayed for 7-8 months. "My soul was broken again!". Then, when the youngest son was 3-4 years old, her father developed diabetes and became dependent to her mother. These were two important losses for her. The identification of these aspects was possible as a result of the card choices made by the client regarding her sons, within the Imagogenogram.

After analyzing the Imagogenogram, she realized that she saw her grandfather as a model, she was very happy while they lived together. Then he was ill, and she took care of him for a long time, as her mother was the caretaker of her husband, suffering from diabetes. The client continued to share about how she took care of all the elderly in the family, and even of strangers (neighbors, friends of parents). She took them to the doctors, helped them while in hospital, even if at that time she was taking care of her mother-in-law, too. "I feel really good when I can help. I feel the appreciation in their eyes. For me it's very easy, I immediately see the solution, I know a lot of people everywhere." She remained silent, sighed and then slowly said "My life has been dedicated to others!". We analyzed her need from the perspective of the elements identified, observed and she realized that it is her way of externalizing her love, through services, the need to be considered useful, a capable and a trustworthy person, like her grandmother.

Observing how she dealt a lot with the affairs of others, how she easily saw everything that happened around her, how she considered herself stronger than the others, how she tended to assume all the tasks, how she believed she had to help others organize their lives, also thinking about all the moments when she felt betrayed, it appeared that she acted that way in order to have control. By taking care of others, L. could control how the others reacted towards her, how and when they would do it. It was a way to show them her strength. If she was in control she could no longer be surprised by the painful things that have hurt her in the past.

Towards the end of the session, she looked at the images again and noticed that she had positioned herself in the center. She remained in silence for a moment and then said "I am the core", as she said she used to feel at the

office before being marginalized. I worked with this metaphor. She became aware of the need to be the center of attention, important and appreciated by those around her. It gave her the feeling that she was in control. Then she realized that this need urged her do tasks that made her tired, most of the time.

The technique used was revealing of how the client connected with her family and helped her to correlate present events with past interactions with family members.

Case 3 – "I didn't even know I had beautiful eyes!"

R., male, 24 years old, unmarried.

The client came to therapy for relationship issues. He had been in a 3-year relationship with his girlfriend and recently they broke up. He was feeling very sad, confused, worried, suffered from the breakup. He felt guilty, burdened. He graduated from a technical faculty and worked in a prolific field. He was very pleased with his professional achievements and earned well.

From the experiential psychodiagnosis it emerged that R. has tensed relations with his father and ex-girlfriend. On identifying certain relational patterns, as a hypothesis I assumed he had a low level of self-esteem, there were maladaptive patterns and a faulty relationship with his family.

Client objectives: understanding the relationship with the ex-girlfriend. "I want to understand what's going on with me."

Therapist objectives: identifying, reducing old, maladaptive patterns and integrating new, adaptive ones; clarifying and recovering the relationship with the family (father, mother); personal growth through self-knowledge and awareness; unlocking one's resources; retrieving the real meanings of one's existence; increasing self-esteem.

In the first two sessions R. recounted about his relationship with his ex-girlfriend and the consequent dynamics. Wanting to explore the client's behavioral patterns, I proposed to him to create the Imagogenogram.

Figure 5

At the indication "choose cards for your family members", the client first picked a card for his mother, who he said was the most important person for him, she was beautiful, kind, smart and hardworking. "She only knew profession, children, work, college. Even now I can't understand how a woman like her could stay for so long with dad. She always had a good job that could ensure her independence." He was silent for a while and tears started to run down his cheeks.

He then chose his father. "Dad is the devil. A very bad, aggressive man. Drinks a lot. He would beat us all (my mother, me and my brother). He used to beat my mother out of the most stupid reasons. He thinks he is the greatest, criticizes everyone, he knows all. I am very ashamed with him. I hate him!" In the Imagogenogram the father is located the first on the left, on the second row, represented by a catchy, much younger man (his actual age is 52). "My dad is the wise guy, the player. He only does what he wants, like a teenager."

R. chose a card for his brother who is 3 years younger than him. "He's a good boy, he's studying, he's struggling to do something with is life." After that, he chose a card for one of his male cousins, his paternal grandfather and grandmother, his maternal grandmother, a female cousin and two other male cousins. Between his mother and his brother, he placed the female cousin and the two grandmothers.

He put his paternal grandfather next to his father. "Grandpa was the father of the devil. A very tough man, a very bad man. He talked badly to women. He said children were weak things. I was 5-6 years old. I remember he would wake me up at 4 a.m. and take me with him to work. I worked very hard. Hard work, the work of a man. I didn't have a childhood. I didn't play. I only worked." The man did not speak bad words to him, but once he beat R. related to R.'s brother, who was grandfather's apple of the eye. "Grandpa was a very hardworking man. He had a lot of land, he worked hard, he had great wealth. He left me nothing. He gave a lot of money to the church, some land to my brother. But I was working with him side by side. I suffered a lot because he didn't leave me anything."

About his paternal grandmother, R. said that since she was young, from the age of 28, was suffering from Parkinson's disease. She never worked. "Since I was 10-11 I took care of her. They sent me to give her pills. I had a good relationship with her, she was warm and good. She was relying on me. I was living with her. When I grew up it was good that I could come and visit her, there I felt free, like I was running away from the hell in my house." The paternal grandparents did not live together. They stayed in different houses in the same yard. The grandfather would barely visit her. There was a 10-year difference between them. "He married grandma for her land. They had 4 children together, dad is the eldest. Dad was grandpa's faithful servant."

About the maternal grandmother, R. recounted that she was a housewife, faithful, good, but bad-mouthed. She worked very hard. She always said that it's important what people say – "they judge you if you do something against the tradition". "I took care of her too." The maternal grandfather was an alcoholic, a violent man, who would beat his wife but not the children. With the grandchildren he was gentler. For the two grandfathers R. only chose one card. He looked at the card and uttered in a sarcastic voice, "both princes charming!".

He positioned the three cousins separately, up-row in the Imagogenogram. He described the first as funny, charismatic and sympathetic, about the second one he said that he was smart and involved, and about the third that he was the beauty of the family. He looked attentively at the three of them and said "I would like to resemble them". On seeing the cards that represented the three of the younger men, he realized that they were his male role models.

Answering the question "where are you", the client chose a card that represented a bald, elderly man with a sad smile, that he put next to his mother (first on the left, the bottom row – Figure 5). "I like that he is cheerful and wise." To the question "how old do you think he is", he looked at the photo for a long time and answered "He's much older than me." Then he realized that as a child he behaved like an adult (working with his grandfather, caretaking for the women in the family in the absence of responsible and involved men). With tearful eyes he began to speak about the fact that when he was 7 years old, his mother took him and his brother by the hand and asked his opinion, whether to leave home or not. "I will never forgive myself for saying no to leaving, I was afraid. My mother has told me many times that she stayed because of what I had said." We talked about how adults make decisions, about the fact that he was only a child, that he could not decide for the adults around him. He became aware of how the family over-responsibilized him.

During the sessions, the Imagogenogram underwent several changes, as R. became aware of and gave a different meaning to the dynamics in the family. First, he positioned himself next to his father and his two grandfathers (Figure 6 – middle row).

Figure 6

Then he placed himself next to his grandfathers, put his father next to his brother, his mother with his two grandmothers, and the four cousins together (Figure 7).

Figure 7

The last Imagogenogram was the one in which he represented himself (Figure 8).

Figure 8

He kept the card originally chosen for himself and added three more images of how he would like to be: "sometimes childish, sometimes an adventurous young man like the one with a hat, other times serious as the gentleman with the tie and wise as the gentleman with a beard". He remained silent for a while. "I understand now that this hard life that I led helped me to become who I am today, a serious, hardworking man. I've accomplished a lot for my age. At work I'm the best at what I do. My boss gives me the hardest projects. And there are colleagues there much older than me. With much more experience. Work seems to me like a piece of cake compared to what I've been striving on. This hard life motivated me to want to get out of there, to do something with my life."

As a result of working with the Imagogenogram, the client managed to get to know himself better, to increase his self-image, he became aware of the old, maladaptive patterns, he clarified his relationship with the family, he managed to deblock his resources, to find real meanings and the greater purpose of his existence.

If the young man who first stepped into my therapy office was sad, unkept, unsure of himself, after the sessions involving the Imagogenogram he became a slender, beautiful, trimmed young man, feeling more confident and cheerful. "I started looking in the mirror. I love what I see. It's as if only now I am seeing myself with my own eyes. I didn't even know I had beautiful eyes. And also my house looks cleaner, more pleasant."

V. Conclusions

In the Imagogenogram, the persons illustrated in front of the client gain a greater poignancy, they become more present, more visible, easier to understand, the client connects with 'authentic' people, being able to empathize and forgive, and, why not, free themselves and move on. Identifying and framing the *problem* in the family context is easy for the client. Images and stories are catchy for clients, who thus allow themselves to be more easily discovered.

The Imagogenogram proves to be a powerful psychotherapeutic tool, of great help for the decryption of personal and transgenerational scenarios, as well as for the resignification and integration of the elements discovered.

From the perspective of the therapist, the Imagogenogram is a mean to "break the ice", to distract the client from their own anxiety, to reduce their defenses. It is a tool through which we can more easily support the processes of self-awareness and self-clarification of some aspects previously unbalanced in the client. The Imagogenogram easily gives us access to the dynamics of the family unconscious and its contents (to subtle mechanisms, to family projection, to family denial), to family loyalty, to parentification situations, to family myths, rituals and secrets.

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