

Imaginative Thought and Creativity in Psychotherapy

By Jerome L. Singer, Ph.D.

Our human capacity for imagery, the ability to represent sensory experiences of people, objects and events in an analogue form, is a unique feature of our evolutionary development. This ability forms much of the basis for stream of consciousness and narrative processes about our personal lives and our relationships with others or with society as well as the physical world. Much of our thinking can be characterized as involving either narrative or paradigmatic (logical-sequential) approaches as Jerome Bruner has shown or, to use the extensively-researched concepts of Seymour Epstein of the University of Massachusetts, a cognitive-experiential versus a logical approach. Studies of creative achievements in the arts, humanities as well as in science and invention, demonstrate how these two approaches interact to produce a novel output. For example, the great physicist Niels Bohr was confronted with the distressing situation of his son as a petty thief. He struggled to reconcile the image of the youth he loved and his picturing him as a criminal. His thoughts led next to imagining the famous figure-ground illusion one finds in psychology texts (a charming girl's image which on further gazing turns into an old hag). Bohr then began to think of comparable problems in the emerging field of quantum physics and this led to logical and mathematical abilities in his influential Principle of Complementarity.

Over the past thirty-five years I have examined the various ways in which our imagery, daydream and narrative thought processes operate in various forms of psychotherapy. In psychodynamic treatment orientations, the encouragement of patients' memories, dreams, daydreams and transference fantasies all represent ways in which clients use their imagery and narrative skills. In the cognitive-behavioral therapies, techniques such as systematic desensitization, covert aversive conditioning, covert modeling, flooding, etc. depend heavily on the clients' production of vivid images. Almost all forms of therapy in the later course of treatment encourage alternative and often creative new ways of relating and behaving which necessarily involve imagined rehearsals of new social scripts.

My colleague at Yale, Robert Sternberg (newly elected APA President) has shown in many research studies that *Successful Intelligence* comprises three basic abilities: analytic (the old IQ), practical and creative. His research group has shown that school curricula in which teachers combine training for all three skills are quite effective. I would like to suggest that psychotherapists take this work seriously. Using our imagery and narrative skills to enhance problem solving may prove to be effective not only for individual patients but may also present methods for assessing process and outcome in psychotherapeutic intervention.

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