Article 25

The Use of Metaphor in Counseling Couples

Rebecca L. Withrow

Throughout history, humans in every culture have partnered in some form or another to coordinate the tasks of bearing and rearing children (Kenrick & Trost, 1997), making marriage one of the most common human interactions (Gottman, 1994). Marriage has taken a variety of forms, and fulfilled a variety of needs, from individual and familial to communal. The manifestations of this very common human experience are diverse, and cultures have always maintained and promoted culture-specific norms, expectations, and beliefs about marriage.

Myth

Myths are one of the primary venues by which cultures codify expectations, norms, and beliefs (Harrington & Williams, 2003), and the institution of marriage has been no exception. Stories, in their many forms (e.g., religious, fiction, and nonfiction), fall into the category of myth. Media also provide a large source of modern day myths by which contemporary U. S. society defines itself. Television, movies, magazines, self-help books, and popular music all reflect cultural traditions, expectations, norms, and beliefs about marriage and other cultural institutions. When defined as the medium through which norms are reflected and created, myths in fact incorporate many forms of story and folklore.

This combination of stories, then, provides a marriage mythology to which people look for information about how marriage should work. Here people learn whether they should marry because of love, enduring friendship, financial reasons, or family expectations. The stories tell people whether to marry the partner parents pick out or the one who makes them laugh. The mythology often defines the gender, social class, and financial status of the ideal or appropriate partner, and specifies the conditions, if any, under which marriage can be dissolved. In short, the mythology reflects what the rest of society considers best when it comes to marriage. Needless to say, the marriage mythologies of various cultures differ vastly from one another.

However, the differences in marriage myths do not exist just between cultures; the variety within the U.S. alone is staggering. In a society composed of many different cultural backgrounds, family diversity flourishes (Stacey, 2000), and choices about marriage abound. People can marry for love, money, or family choice. They can annul, divorce, remarry, or remain single as many times as they choose. They can marry as soon as they meet, or be engaged for years first. They can live together indefinitely, and have children, without ever marrying.

In the absence of one coherent set of societal expectations, individuals and couples are left to create or select their own myths, or models, for what form of marriage will best suit their needs. Some people define their model marriage through a favorite song, movie, or book, while others' ideals revolve around a relationship in a fairy tale or family story. Still others espouse strict religious definitions of marriage. An individual's idealized relationship is his or her personal myth, and as such, both reflects that person's beliefs about what marriage is, and serves as a model for that individual's actions and interactions in marriage.

For some, the selection of a personal marriage myth is an intentional process, whereby individuals consciously select and recognize their internal beliefs and expectations. For others the selection takes place at an unconscious level, if at all. For some, marriage myths are dictated by a cultural system, such as a church or a family. Frequently in the U. S., however, responsibility for defining marriage falls on the shoulders of the hapless bride and groom whose ideas about it may extend no further than a happily-ever-after hope or a fierce determination to avoid divorce. With a divorce rate that hovers around 50%, many marrying individuals have witnessed the dissolution of their parents' marriages; in many new couples this is true of both partners. If personal myths about marriage are passed from parents to children, as some theorists believe (Amato & DeBoer, 2001), many current marriage myths probably contain an escape route through the option of divorce. From a culturally relativistic viewpoint, this is neither positive nor

negative. But for the young couple who hopes and expects their marriage will last forever, unconsciously held ideas about marriage and divorce could hold powerful implications for the viability of a cherished relationship.

Metaphor: The Personal Myth

Researchers and practitioners frequently use the terms *myth* and *metaphor* interchangeably. Kopp (1995) suggested that individual metaphors are analogous to cultural myths: "…cultural myths are the narrations by which our society is unified and … personal myths revealed in one's earliest childhood memories are the guiding fictions that unify an individual's personality" (p. xxi). In this article, metaphors refer to these guiding fictions individuals use to construct and interpret reality.

Technically, a metaphor is a comparison between two things that are literally different. The comparison, which uses traits associated with one object or relationship to describe another object or relationship, reveals the schema or organizational pattern an individual uses to understand and interact with that which is being described (Atwood & Levine, 1991; Thompson, 1990). Like myths, which select some details and leave out others, the metaphoric comparison focuses on certain traits of the thing being described, to the exclusion of other traits. For example, the phrase "love is like a rose" allows the speaker or listener to compare traits of love to traits of roses. One might state that both are beautiful, that both have thorns, or that both eventually die. Individuals' metaphors for things (like love) can uncover the unconsciously held beliefs, attitudes, and emotions they use to understand and behave in the world. However, it is not the metaphor alone, but the particular associations between the thing described (love) and the metaphor (rose) that reveal the particular, specific organizational pattern of the individual. Thompson proposed that when clients tell stories, or present metaphors, they are selecting the problems and aspects of the problems that are most salient for them at that moment. Papp (1990) credited the metaphor with uniting disconnected patterns of behavior, interaction, and perception and, for this reason, suggests defining relationships through metaphors rather than through literal descriptions.

Metaphors in Couple's Counseling

Metaphors are being used by couple's counselors in a variety of ways to help build concepts of marriage and work through marital problems. Many counselors have suggested metaphoric interventions with couples for education and problem-solving purposes. For example, metaphors are used to teach systems concepts to couples and families, to help couples understand the impact of individuals' issues on the family, and to change unhealthy interaction patterns to healthier ones. Other therapists suggest the use of specific metaphors for helping couples understand and process certain family dynamics such as the balance between individual freedom and belonging, self and system, vulnerability and self-protection, harmony and discord, and influence of family of origin. Papp (1990) suggested metaphor as a vehicle for exploring central themes or highly emotional presenting problems around which couples become polarized.

Practitioners have suggested many ways of using metaphors to teach couples. However, some research has suggested that couple agreement on marital issues is key to marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1994). Couple agreement can mean seeing eye to eye on issues that affect the marriage, including external influences (like finances or societal issues) as well as internal (dyadic) influences. It can also mean holding similar views of marriage: what its functions are, what its rewards and costs are, and who plays which roles in the relationship.

As early as six decades ago, societal expectations and pressures that once externally held marriages together began losing power, leaving more and more of the responsibility for sustaining the marriage to the internal forces of the individual couple (Burgess & Locke, 1945). This has allowed couples to adapt marriage to their unique situations and needs, and provided many unhappily married couples with socially tolerated alternatives to sticking it out. However, two individuals who approach the altar with very different sets of beliefs, or very different metaphors, face the challenge of either merging their metaphors or facing marital gridlock and eventual divorce (Gottman, Ryan, Carrere, & Erley, 2002). The marriage metaphor is a key element in the merging of couples' beliefs and expectations about marriage.

Implications for Counseling

Kopp (1995) proposed a six-step process to help counselors use client-generated metaphors to uncover unconscious material and explore potential solutions. The first four steps involve elicitation and in-depth exploration of client metaphors, while the final two steps use the metaphor itself to propose potential solutions.

The first step, Kopp stated, is to listen for client metaphors. Client metaphors may sound something like, "My home is supposed to be a refuge" or "I feel like my marriage is stagnant." Metaphors are not always expressed in the form of x is like y, as learned in high

school English; they do, however, imply an association between two things that are literally different. The second step is to invite client explanations of the metaphor. For example, a counselor might say, "*Stagnant* is an interesting word. Tell me more about how the marriage is stagnant." The third step is to explore the metaphor as a sensory image. The counselor might ask, "What does stagnant look like? Does it have any smell or sound?" The fourth step is to have the client explore associated feelings. For example, the therapist might say, "When you think of your stagnant marriage, what are you feeling?"

Ultimately, the therapeutic usefulness of client-generated metaphors stems from the tendency of metaphors themselves to hold the seeds of potential solutions to client problems (Atwood & Levine, 1991; Kopp, 1995). Kopp's last two steps help the counselor and client uncover these potential solutions. In the fifth step, the counselor invites the client to change the metaphor. The counselor might ask, "Do you want your marriage to feel stagnant? If not, how would you like it to feel instead?" The client may respond with something like, "I don't want it to stand still any more. I want some motion, some excitement. I want my marriage to feel fresh and new." In the final step the counselor helps the client parallel the original situation to a feasible solution. The counselor here may ask, "How could you change the stagnant marriage that you have to the moving, exciting, fresh marriage you want?" If the client responds within the metaphor (for example with, "I could unblock some obstructions") the counselor can follow up with, "What are some of the obstructions in your marriage now? How could you unblock them?"

Conclusion

Ideals about marriage have always been culturally defined, and are as varied as the cultures whose ideals they espouse. Like all cultural norms, these ideas are found in the cultural myths that both reflect current reality and offer a model for future reality. However, there is no one marriage reality in modern U. S. mythology, just as there is no consensus about what marriage should be. Even within one culture, people define marriage differently, and hold very different expectations of marriage. This can become problematic when the marriage partners themselves hold different personal myths, or metaphors, for marriage, especially when these norms, expectations, and beliefs remain unconscious. Using metaphors with couples can help counselors and their clients identify and explore their personal myths about marriage, and seek, within the myths themselves, potential solutions to marital difficulties.

References

Amato, P. R., & DeBoer, D. D. (2001). The transmission of marital instability across generations: Relationship skills or commitment to marriage? *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 63,* 1038-1051.

Atwood, J. D., & Levine, L. B. (1991). Ax murderers, dragons, spiders, and webs: Therapeutic metaphors in couples' therapy. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 13,* 201-217.

Burgess, E. W., & Locke, J. (1945). *The family, from institution to companionship.* New York: American Book.

Gottman, J. M. (1994). *What predicts divorce?: The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gottman, J. M., Ryan, K. D., Carrere, S., & Erley, A. M. (2002). Toward a scientifically based marital therapy. In H. A. Liddle, D. A. Santisteban, R. F. Levant, & J. H. Bray (Eds.), *Family psychology: Science-based interventions*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Harrington, J., & Williams, G. (2003, August). *A metaphor retreat.* Presentation at the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, Chattanooga, TN.

Kenrick, D. T., & Trost, R. (1997). Evolutionary approaches to relationships. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships: Theory, record, and interventions,* (2nd ed., pp. 151-177). New York: Wiley.

Kopp, R. R. (1995). *Metaphor therapy: Using client-generated metaphors in psychotherapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Papp, P. (1990). The use of structured fantasy in couple therapy. In R. Chasin & H. Grunebaum (Eds.), *One couple, four realities: Multiple perspectives on couple therapy* (pp. 25-48). New York: Guilford Press.

Stacey, J. (2000). The handbook's tail: Toward revels or a requiem for family diversity? In D. Demo, K. Allen, & M. Fine (Eds.), *Handbook of family diversity* (pp. 424-439). New York: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, K. F. (1990). Metaphor: A myth with a method. In J. K. Zeig & S. G. Gilligan (Eds.), *Brief therapy: Myths, methods, and metaphors.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.