

Use of Metaphors in Schema Therapy: Symbolic Expression of Early Maladaptive Schemas

Şema Terapide Metafor Kullanımı: Erken Dönem Uyum Bozucu
Şemaların Sembolik Anlatımı

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ABSTRACT

Schema therapy is a holistic psychotherapy approach that targets early-stage maladaptive schemas, which develop in childhood and persist throughout an individual's life at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels. Because schemas are deep and abstract structures that often develop as a result of the damaging thwarting of an individual's basic needs, they are difficult for individuals to directly recognize. In this context, metaphors are tools that not only concretize the complex structures of abstract schemas but also facilitate the therapeutic process. The aim of this study is to use metaphors to facilitate clients' understanding of early-stage maladaptive schemas and to strengthen therapeutic narrative during the psychoeducation phase, a crucial phase of schema therapy. In this study, a unique metaphor was developed for each schema. These metaphors aim to help clients understand their recurring patterns, gain awareness of their lives and preferences, and actively participate in the therapy process. The article also explores the multifaceted functions of metaphors in therapeutic processes, including gaining insight, recognizing and overcoming resistance, facilitating emotional regulation, and reframing. This review aims to provide therapists with a conceptual foundation for future qualitative and quantitative studies, while also offering a unique and meaningful language for schema-focused interventions.

Keywords: Schema therapy, early maladaptive schemas, metaphor, psychotherapy

ÖZ

Şema terapi, bireyin çocukluk döneminde oluşan ve yaşam boyu bilişsel, duygusal ve davranışsal düzeyde etkisini sürdüren erken dönem uyum bozucu şemaları hedef alan bütüncül bir psikoterapi yaklaşımıdır. Şemalar, genellikle bireyin temel ihtiyaçlarının zedeleyici biçimde engellenmesiyle gelişen derin ve soyut yapılar olmaları sebebiyle bireyler tarafından doğrudan fark edilmesi zor yapılardır. Bu bağlamda metaforlar, soyut olan şemaların karmaşık yapılarını somutlaştırmanın yanı sıra terapötik sürecin kolaylaşmasını sağlayan araçlardır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, şema terapinin önemli bir aşaması olan psikoeğitim evresinde danışanların erken dönem uyum bozucu şemaları daha kolay anlamalarını sağlamak amacıyla metaforları kullanmak ve terapötik anlatımı güçlendirmektir. Çalışmada, her bir şema için özgün birer metafor geliştirilmiştir. Bu metaforlar, danışanın tekrarlayan örüntülerini anlamalarına, yaşamlarına ve tercihlerine dair farkındalık kazanmalarına ve terapi sürecine aktif katılım sağlamalarına yardımcı olmayı hedeflemektedir. Yanı sıra makalede metaforların terapi sürecindeki içgörü kazanma, direnci fark etme ve dirençle başa çıkma, duygusal regülasyonu kolaylaştırma ve yeniden çerçevelemeyi sağlama gibi işlevleri de çok boyutlu biçimde ele alınmıştır. Bu derleme, terapistlere gelecekte yapılacak olan hem nitel hem de nicel çalışmalara kavramsal bir temel oluşturmayı hedeflerken aynı zamanda şema odaklı müdahaleler için özgün ve anlam yüklü bir dil sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Şema terapi, erken dönem uyum bozucu şemalar, metafor, psikoterapi

Introduction

Early maladaptive schemas are dysfunctional cognitive-emotional patterns that develop when an individual's core emotional needs are unmet during childhood and adolescence. Schema therapy is an integrative and experiential psychotherapy model that aims to identify, restructure, and transform these patterns. Because early maladaptive schemas are abstract, rigid, and difficult for clients to recognize, the therapeutic process often requires distinctive modes of expression that make these internal structures more accessible (Young et al. 2003). At this point, metaphors emerge as powerful and creative tools that help individuals reorganize their experiences and develop insight.

The use of metaphors in psychotherapy is not merely decorative; rather, metaphors serve as mechanisms that can organize both cognitive and experiential processes (Wirtztum et al. 1988). Cognitive metaphor theory posits that metaphors concretize abstract meanings, thereby making the individual's inner world more comprehensible (Piştof and Şanlı 2013). This perspective is particularly valuable when working with complex, deeply rooted psychological structures, as is common in schema therapy, because it renders the client's experience more visible. Metaphors also facilitate the externalization of internal experiences, promote cognitive restructuring, and strengthen the therapeutic alliance (Young et al. 2003).

Within the context of schema therapy, metaphors represent the abstract structures of schemas through tangible imagery, thereby enhancing the client's awareness of early maladaptive schemas. Through metaphorical language, the therapist reframes distressing experiences in a non-threatening manner, allowing the client to express themselves more comfortably and assign new meaning to their experiences. This review article aims to strengthen therapeutic communication and provide a creative contribution to the literature by presenting original metaphors associated with the 18 early maladaptive schemas defined by Young et al. (2003).

Finally, the role of metaphors in psychotherapy is closely linked to emotion regulation. Metaphors allow clients to observe their emotional experiences from a safe distance, making them particularly effective when working with traumatic experiences. In this sense, metaphor serves an important therapeutic function in regulating the intense emotions triggered by early maladaptive schemas. The metaphor examples included in this study were selected according to specific criteria. Priority was given to metaphors that align with the cognitive and emotional themes of each schema, are comprehensible and internalizable for clients, hold meaning within cultural contexts, and facilitate therapeutic communication. Additionally, metaphors were categorized as cognitive, emotional, or behavioral based on the dimensions inherent in each schema. This approach enables metaphors to function not only as symbolic analogies but also as tools that make the functional aspects of schemas more visible.

This study aims to simplify the often-complex early maladaptive schemas featured in Schema Therapy by presenting them through metaphorical narratives, thereby enriching therapeutic communication and facilitating readers' internalization of the schemas.

Schema Therapy

Schema therapy, developed by Jeffrey Young and colleagues, is an integrative theory and treatment approach. It expands upon the methods and concepts of traditional Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) by incorporating early maladaptive schemas, coping styles, and modes. Designed to address personality disorders and chronic psychological difficulties, schema therapy provides a systematic framework for cases in which traditional CBT alone is insufficient. Owing to its emphasis on strengthening healthy functioning, it is used not only in individual therapy but also in group and couples therapy (Martin and Young 2010). The model integrates components of cognitive-behavioral theory, attachment theory, object relations, Gestalt techniques, constructivist approaches, and psychodynamic concepts (Young et al. 2003). In addition to being integrative, it combines cognitive, behavioral, and experiential techniques with its own distinctive elements to achieve therapeutic goals (Farrell et al. 2018).

Schema therapy places significant importance on early maladaptive schemas and coping styles, the exploration of childhood and adolescent origins of present-day emotional and psychological difficulties, experiential strategies, and the therapeutic relationship. This approach focuses heavily on interpersonal schemas and conceptualizes the client's personality-related difficulties as separate from the self, thereby enhancing awareness and increasing the likelihood of change. Early maladaptive schemas occupy a central position in this model; they emerge when core needs are unmet during childhood and adolescence, are shaped by temperament and early environmental interactions, and may also be influenced by traumatic experiences or the excessive fulfillment of certain needs. These schemas are distorted and dysfunctional structures that, when activated, give rise to "schema modes"—intense cognitive, emotional, and behavioral states (Arntz and Jacob 2016, Farrell et al. 2018).

According to the schema therapy framework, which addresses 18 early maladaptive schemas, schemas are grouped into five broad domains:

1. Disconnection and Rejection (related to the need for secure attachment)
2. Impaired Autonomy and Performance (related to the need for autonomy, competence, and identity)
3. Impaired Limits (related to realistic limits and self-control)
4. Other-Directedness (related to the need for freedom to express needs and emotions)
5. Overvigilance and Inhibition (related to spontaneity and play)

The core intervention methods of schema therapy include cognitive, experiential, behavioral, and relational techniques. The therapeutic process aims to increase clients' awareness of their early maladaptive schemas, help them confront the impact of these schemas on their lives, repair injurious childhood experiences, and develop healthier and more functional coping strategies (Young et al. 2003).

Definition of Metaphor

There are numerous definitions of the concept of metaphor. According to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) research, it is ultimately language that speaks, and the language of language is metaphor. The metaphorical nature of language becomes evident when one examines the word metaphor itself. Derived from the Greek *metaphora*, the term originates from *meta* (meaning "beyond") and *pherein* (meaning "to carry"), and thus conveys the idea of "carrying something from one place to another" (Huang et al. 2024).

In its simplest form, a metaphor is the expression of one thing by likening it to another. In this sense, metaphors convey a meaning or idea by comparing it to something else, thereby strengthening the meaning and aiming to communicate a concept or theme more effectively. Moreover, a metaphor associates an entity with something it is not, generating new meanings and perspectives (Aydın 2006).

Another way to understand metaphor is as the encapsulation of at least two contents within a single form. This creates a perspective that resists easy resolution between literal and figurative meanings. In summary, a metaphor arises from the interplay of these two meanings. Metaphorical expression does not occur simply between the literal meanings of two expressions but rather between two opposing interpretations of the metaphor itself. The tension between these interpretations gives rise to the metaphor, and metaphorical meaning emerges when the literal interpretation collapses under the weight of this contradiction (Demir 2017).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a metaphor is defined as "understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another," and it represents a unique way of making sense of life. From a psychotherapeutic standpoint, metaphors help align the cognitive structures of both the therapist and the client. They facilitate communication by creating a shared symbolic space between them (Piştof and Şanlı 2013). For instance, when a client describes an overwhelming emotional experience by saying "it feels like I'm drowning," this expression conveys not only the level of anxiety but also the individual's capacity to cope

with their emotional experience. The therapist can use this metaphor to foster empathetic understanding and guide interventions accordingly.

Therapeutically, another essential function of metaphors is their role in cognitive restructuring and reframing. Metaphorical expressions provide clients with an alternative perspective that helps them loosen rigid beliefs about themselves or their problems (Karairmak and Güloğlu 2012). For example, the metaphor “you don’t have to carry the entire burden yourself” can help a person recognize schemas related to self-sacrifice or subjugation, while also creating space to question feelings of guilt. In this regard, metaphors communicate not only the content of an experience but also the individual’s stance toward that content.

Use of Metaphors in Schema Therapy

Abandonment / Instability Schema

Individuals with the abandonment/instability schema experience significant difficulty trusting in the stability and permanence of important others in their lives. This schema typically develops in response to inconsistent, unpredictable, and unreliable caregiving patterns. Due to these experiences, individuals come to believe that emotional support, closeness, and protection cannot be sustained over time. The dominant theme within this schema is instability; therefore, individuals assume that their relationships will not endure, that loved ones will abandon them, and that they will eventually be left alone. These beliefs generate intense distress (Güler 2020).

This schema may emerge due to caregivers’ inconsistent behaviors, frequent outbursts of anger, experiences of abandonment by a caregiver, the loss of a caregiver, or emotional and physical disengagement (Rafaeli et al. 2019). Individuals with the abandonment/instability schema tend to remain hypervigilant to signs of separation and may respond to such cues with exaggerated emotional reactions. The core reason for this reactivity is the deeply rooted belief that loved ones will eventually leave them, resulting in fears of being alone (Young and Klosko 2015).

Metaphor 1: The Torn Kite

Imagine a kite with a thread so fragile that it could snap at any moment, drifting in the wind. Each time the kite rises into the sky, it remains unable to trust the loyalty of the hand holding the string the hand holds it now, but what if one day it lets go?

Explanation

This metaphor symbolizes the individual’s sense of fragility within relationships and the persistent feeling of “living as if about to fall from the sky.” The kite’s string represents the attachment figure, while the wind symbolizes relational uncertainty. The kite’s ongoing inability to feel secure reflects the intense fear generated by the abandonment schema.

Metaphor 2: The Tides

Imagine standing at the edge of the sea. At times the waves recede, and at other times they suddenly crash ashore. Sometimes the sand beneath your feet feels firm and safe, while at other moments it shifts and slips away. This mirrors how the individual feels in relationships sometimes calm and secure, other times anxious and on the verge of being abandoned.

This metaphor illustrates the emotional fluctuations created by the schema and the perceived inconsistency experienced in close relationships.

Explanation

While the kite metaphor highlights the individual’s vulnerability and mistrust in relationships, the tide metaphor gives form to the emotional highs and lows associated with the abandonment schema. Together, these metaphors represent different dimensions of the schema fear of loss, clinging, and emotional

instability through multiple symbolic layers, offering a more comprehensive expression of the underlying therapeutic themes.

Mistrust / Abuse Schema

Individuals with the mistrust/abuse schema hold a rigid belief and expectation that others will harm, deceive, exploit, manipulate, or ultimately abandon them (Martin and Young 2009). As a result of these beliefs, they feel a strong need to protect themselves and may approach people with pervasive suspicion. Their conviction that others are capable of inflicting harm at any moment may lead them to avoid close relationships entirely or to keep their interactions at a superficial level (Young and Klosko 2015).

Early life experiences of individuals with this schema often include emotional, physical, or sexual abuse by family members or caregivers; exposure to harsh or cruel treatment; or experiences of verbal or physical mistreatment (Roediger 2015, Arntz and Jacob 2016). Caregivers may also have been highly critical or demeaning. Consequently, the belief that others can be sincere, benevolent, or caring becomes severely damaged, and individuals continually attempt to test the trustworthiness of people in their lives (Young et al. 2003).

Metaphor: The Locked Door and the Misleading Doorbells

Imagine a house inhabited by someone who is lonely, fragile, yet open to love. Every day, people arrive at the door offering help, friendship, and affection. Yet each ringing of the bell triggers intense fear in the homeowner. In the past, someone who rang that same bell turned the entire house upside down. Since that day, the homeowner has not only changed the lock but added several more. Still, the fear persists every time the bell rings. Each bell evokes both hope and terror, and an inner voice whispers: "What if you open the door and get hurt again?"

Explanation

This metaphor illustrates how a person with the mistrust/abuse schema simultaneously desires connection yet distances themselves from intimacy out of a need for protection. Past experiences of exploitation, betrayal, or emotional injury lead the individual to view everyone as a potential threat. In therapy, the goal is to respect the existence of the "door" while gradually helping the individual differentiate which bells signal genuine danger and which ones signal the possibility of care.

Emotional Deprivation Schema

Individuals with the emotional deprivation schema believe that their emotional needs will not be adequately met by others. These needs can be grouped under three main categories: the need for nurturance (love, closeness, and being valued), the need for empathy (being heard, understood, and emotionally attuned to), and the need for protection (guidance and support) (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

In early childhood, these individuals often have caregivers who were cold, distant, inattentive, or unable to provide emotional warmth and security (Roediger 2015 Arntz and Jacob 2016). People with this schema struggle to recognize or accept others' care and affection and tend to believe that no one truly cares about them or ever will. Consequently, their relationships frequently feel unsatisfying (Young and Klosko 2015). Additionally, influenced by the rigidity of this belief, they may adopt overly self-sacrificing roles in relationships (Young and Klosko 2011).

Metaphor: The Leaking Water Bag

Imagine yourself as a water bag with a hole at the bottom; no matter how much water is poured in, it eventually empties out. Even when others offer love, care, or affection, these feelings never seem sufficient because they do not accumulate they seep out quickly. Each time you look inside, you see emptiness and conclude that no one has ever truly filled the bag. Yet the real issue is not the absence of water, but the fact that the bag's capacity to hold it has been damaged over time.

Explanation

This metaphor represents the difficulty individuals with the emotional deprivation schema experience in internalizing affection due to early emotional neglect and insufficient nurturance. Even when love and care are offered, they cannot retain these feelings because they have not developed a stable internal structure capable of holding emotional nourishment. Like a leaking bag, every positive experience drains away quickly. This leads to an inability to perceive signals of care from others and reinforces chronic feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. In therapy, the aim is not only to introduce new sources of emotional sustenance but also to “repair the bag” that is, to restore the individual’s capacity to receive and preserve emotional experiences.

Defectiveness / Shame Schema

The defectiveness/shame schema is characterized by the individual’s belief that they are fundamentally flawed, unworthy, or undeserving of love. Individuals often develop feelings of shame in relation to one or several perceived deficiencies or inadequacies. When this schema is activated, they may become excessively sensitive to criticism, rejection, and blame, and may withdraw in relationships or, conversely, adopt strategies aimed at appearing flawless (Young et al. 2003).

Early life experiences of individuals with this schema typically include highly critical or devaluing caregivers, as well as family dynamics that foster the belief that the individual is unlovable or inherently defective (Roediger 2015, Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Metaphor: The Face in the Cracked Mirror

Imagine a child who looks into the mirror in their room every morning. Because the mirror is cracked, the child sees themselves as distorted, broken, and unattractive. Over time, the child begins to believe that it is not the mirror, but their face that is flawed. They grow increasingly fearful that others will see them, notice their “defects,” and judge them harshly, eventually developing a deep sense of shame. The child assumes that others, too, see the same distorted and broken face reflected back at them.

Explanation

This metaphor offers a powerful representation of the core of the defectiveness schema. The mirror symbolizes the individual’s internal self-perception, while the distorted reflection represents the damaged sense of self-worth shaped by earlier experiences of criticism, humiliation, or emotional neglect. The child defines themselves through the distorted reflections they have internalized and gradually comes to believe these reflections are accurate. In therapy, the central goal is to help the individual recognize that it is the mirror not their face that is cracked, and to guide them toward a more realistic and compassionate self-view.

Social Isolation / Alienation Schema

Individuals with the social isolation/alienation schema believe that they are fundamentally different from others and therefore cannot feel a sense of belonging to any group (Arntz and Jacob 2019). Unlike many other schemas, the core issue here does not stem from the family but rather from experiences of exclusion or alienation in social environments outside the home. Situations in which individuals perceive themselves—or their families—as fundamentally different from others may contribute to the development of this schema (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

Although individuals with this schema may feel comfortable in one-on-one relationships, they often experience anxiety, distance, coldness, or withdrawal in larger groups (Young and Klosko 2015). Early life experiences may include living in socially isolated environments or being excluded by peers. Additionally, similar patterns or schema themes may have been present within the family (Young et al. 2003).

Metaphor: The Child Living in a Glass Dome

In a crowded city, a child sits inside a small, transparent glass dome. The outside world is colorful, lively, and

full of movement, yet the child cannot make their voice heard beyond the glass. People walk past, but no one looks inside. The dome is neither invisible nor permeable the child sees everyone, but no one notices the child. They exist there, yet do not belong there; they are present, yet not part of "them." No matter how much the child wishes to connect, the glass barrier keeps them from joining the world outside. Over time, the child retreats into silence and begins to believe that, no matter what they do, they will never truly be one of "them."

Explanation

This metaphor represents the individual's experience of feeling separated from social life by an invisible barrier. The glass dome reflects both the desire to participate in social life and the unrecognized barrier that prevents genuine connection. The coexistence of inner safety and outer longing captures the essence of the social isolation schema. In therapy, the primary goal is to help the individual recognize the existence of this dome and gradually "crack the glass," enabling them to engage with others and develop a sense of belonging.

Dependence / Incompetence Schema

Individuals with the dependence/incompetence schema believe that they are unable to cope with daily responsibilities or solve problems without the support of others. This belief leads them to feel helpless, and as it strengthens over time, they come to assume that their needs will not be met, that they are incapable of making decisions, and that they cannot manage responsibilities on their own. Consequently, they experience feelings of inadequacy in areas such as decision-making and judgment (Rafaeli et al. 2019). To compensate, they tend to involve people in their lives who can guide them, make decisions on their behalf, or assume control (Bricker and Young 2012). Some individuals exhibit this dependence only in domains they perceive as especially important (Rafaeli et al. 2019), whereas others desire the presence of a powerful figure who will take full control of their lives (Young and Klosko 2015).

The roots of this schema often lie in early life experiences with overly controlling or overprotective families (Roediger 2015). Such caregivers tend to manage the child's decisions and responsibilities rather than allowing them to develop autonomy. They may also habitually take over tasks that the child should be learning to manage independently. This parenting style contributes significantly to the development of the schema (Young et al. 2003).

Metaphor: The Child Who Grew Up With Training Wheels

Imagine a child receiving their first bicycle, equipped with two training wheels. These wheels are meant to prevent falling while learning to ride. Yet, years later, the training wheels remain attached. The child has grown taller, but has never had the chance to learn balance. They still ride that same small bicycle with training wheels. Even though the child now knows how to pedal, they do not believe they can ride without support. When the idea of removing the training wheels is raised, they panic and immediately feel the need for assistance. The child is not truly afraid of falling rather, they are afraid of riding alone.

Explanation

This metaphor represents the "fear of unsafe freedom" experienced by individuals with the dependence schema. The training wheels symbolize the parent, partner, or other support figure, whereas the bicycle represents the individual's personal life. Although the individual may have reached a developmental stage where they can assume responsibility for their life, their belief in their ability to progress independently remains weak. The primary therapeutic goal is to gradually remove these metaphorical training wheels and help the individual build the belief that even if they fall, they can rise again.

Vulnerability to Harm or Illness Schema

Individuals with the vulnerability to harm or illness schema possess an overwhelming fear that a catastrophe may occur at any moment and believe they lack the strength to cope with it (Arntz and Jacob 2016). Because they assume they cannot endure adverse events, they tend to perceive threats in catastrophic and exaggerated ways. In short, they magnify external dangers while minimizing their own

coping capacity (Young et al. 2003). Their fears may encompass a wide range of domains, including medical issues, external disasters (such as natural events), emotional crises (such as “going crazy”), financial concerns, and accidents (Karaosmanoğlu et al. 2016). As a result of perpetual worry about potential threats, individuals with this schema often engage in excessive precaution-taking (Young and Klosko 2015).

This schema is commonly rooted in early environments characterized by overprotective and anxious caregivers (Roediger 2015). Caregivers’ fearful and controlling behaviors may lead the child to perceive the world as dangerous and threatening. Beyond parental influence, experiences such as illness, accidents, or natural disasters that affect either the individual or significant others may also contribute to the development of this schema (Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Metaphor: The Man Living in a Glass House, Fearing the Storm

Imagine a man living in a house deep in the forest, its walls made entirely of glass. Whenever the sky darkens, the man begins to panic: “What if a tree falls?” “What if the glass shatters?” “What if the house collapses?” Each morning, the first thing he does is check the weather. Even a mild wind puts him on high alert. Although nothing has actually happened, he has already experienced thousands of catastrophe scenarios in his mind. In reality, it is not the glass house that exhausts him what wears him down is constantly expecting a storm.

Explanation

This metaphor reflects the individual’s mental vulnerability, hypervigilance, and heightened sensitivity to perceived environmental or bodily threats. The glass house symbolizes the individual’s sense of fragility and insufficiency in protecting themselves, while the sky and storm represent external dangers—real or imagined. Even without an actual threat, the individual lives with a chronic internal expectation of danger. In therapy, the central aims include restructuring risk perceptions, strengthening coping responses to bodily sensations, and cultivating the ability to tolerate vulnerability without constant alarm.

Enmeshment / Undeveloped Self Schema

Individuals with the enmeshment/undeveloped self schema tend to form excessively close and emotionally fused relationships often with a parent or partner, and sometimes with more than one person (Bricker and Young 2012). They place great value on the opinions of those to whom they are strongly attached and feel compelled to consult them before making decisions. In many cases, they believe that they cannot be happy without these significant others. Because the relationship often contains nurturing or gratifying elements, individuals typically do not perceive it as problematic (Arntz and Jacob 2016). However, such excessive attachment can impair the development of autonomy and disrupt typical social maturation processes (Roediger 2015). It may also result in a sense of being “lost” within the relationship and lead individuals to question their own existence or identity (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

The origins of this schema often lie in highly controlling and overprotective family dynamics that hinder the development of an autonomous self (Young and Klosko 2015).

Metaphor: Living Sewn to Someone Else’s Buttons

Imagine a shirt whose buttons are not sewn onto its own buttonholes but attached to another person’s shirt. Every movement is restricted. Whenever the person tries to move in their own direction, the buttons tighten and pull them back. Over time, the individual forgets that they ever had their own buttonholes, because they have lived their entire life attached to someone else. Separation feels like tearing or breaking apart.

Explanation

This metaphor illustrates how individuals in enmeshed relationships lose their personal boundaries and experience a blurring of identity. The buttons represent attachment to others, while the absence of personal buttonholes symbolizes the lack of independent decision-making. Because individuals with this schema become excessively dependent within relationships, they may experience an identity crisis when alone and feel unsure of who they are. The therapeutic aim is to help them recognize their personal

boundaries, practice emotional differentiation, and experience separation without guilt (Rafaeli et al. 2019, Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Failure Schema

Individuals with the failure schema believe that they are incompetent and inferior to their peers and that no matter what they do, they will never be as successful as others. They act with the assumption that they have failed or will inevitably fail, which often prevents them from investing effort into tasks or goals (Young and Klosko 2015). Contributing factors may include families that adopt a highly critical, achievement-focused approach; frequent comparisons with others; or early life environments in which the individual is often exposed to competitive settings (Roediger 2015, Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Metaphor: The Broken Compass

A person with the failure schema is like a traveler who sets out with a compass they believe always points in the wrong direction. Regardless of which path they take, they expect failure at the end of every step. Over time, they stop using the compass altogether. Occasionally, a guide appears on their journey, yet even then, they do not believe they can reach their destination.

Explanation

This metaphor symbolizes the individual's lack of confidence in their abilities, performance, and potential. Because of early experiences of criticism, comparison, humiliation, or lack of support, the person begins to believe that their "inner compass" does not work. No matter how much effort they invest, they assume the outcome will be inadequate. Over time, this belief evolves into learned helplessness, and the individual eventually stops trying altogether. In therapy, the central goal is to demonstrate that the compass is not truly broken—to help the person recognize their existing but unacknowledged skills, reconstruct their understanding of success, and redefine their goals in a more realistic and empowering way.

Entitlement / Grandiosity Schema

Individuals with the entitlement/grandiosity schema struggle to accept limits in their lives and to regulate themselves according to these limits. They experience difficulty empathizing with others and tend to view themselves as more special and privileged than those around them. Because they believe they are superior or inherently entitled, they may assume that rules applicable to others do not apply to them (Arntz and Jacob 2016). They often wish to obtain what they desire quickly and without effort, and they resist structures—such as rules and expectations—imposed by people or institutions. Reciprocity is generally absent in their social relationships, which may be shaped by a tendency to prioritize their own interests and assert dominance (Martin and Young 2010).

This schema commonly develops in individuals who experienced insufficient or inconsistent limit-setting during early childhood (Young and Klosko 2015). Excessive parental admiration paired with a lack of boundaries plays a significant role in its formation (Young and Klosko 2015).

Metaphor: The King on the Fragile Throne

Imagine a king seated on a grand, elevated throne in a magnificent palace, with everyone bowing before him. Although he appears powerful and imposing, the king is acutely aware that his throne is cracked from within yet he conceals this from others. Whenever someone speaks to him as an equal, he feels threatened and becomes angry, sensing that his throne may be shaken. He believes he must always speak from a superior position. Deep down, however, his greatest fear is that the hollow space beneath the throne may one day collapse and bring him down entirely.

Explanation

This metaphor reflects the fragile sense of self that lies beneath the outward superiority of the grandiosity schema. The throne symbolizes the individual's perceived superiority, while its deteriorating structure represents damaged self-worth. The core problem for individuals with this schema is an impaired sense

of personal value. The therapeutic goal is to help the individual reconnect with authentic self-worth and learn to respect the boundaries of others while strengthening their own sense of competence (Rafaeli et al. 2019, Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Insufficient Self-Control / Self-Discipline Schema

The insufficient self-control/self-discipline schema is characterized by difficulties in regulating impulses, emotions, desires, or anger; adhering to long-term goals; and maintaining a disciplined lifestyle (Young et al. 2003).

This schema may weaken emotional resilience, increase procrastination, and interfere with the fulfillment of responsibilities. Because of their low frustration tolerance, individuals may struggle to cope when restricted or hindered (Yöndem 2021). The origins of this schema often lie in caregivers who fail to teach self-control, limits, or autonomy; it is frequently observed in families that are unable to provide consistent discipline (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

Metaphor: The Child Who Reaches for Every Cake

Imagine a table filled with colorful cakes. Each slice represents a different impulse, desire, or emotion. The child sitting before the table cannot decide which one to reach for, so they take a bite from each—one here, one there. They do not feel satisfied, only exhausted. They behave as though they must fulfill every desire immediately. Yet they cannot manage their appetite, their goals, or even the order on the table. They gradually lose control altogether.

Explanation

This metaphor symbolizes the individual's pursuit of immediate gratification at the expense of long-term structure and balance. The cakes represent difficult-to-regulate impulses, while the child symbolizes an individual with underdeveloped self-regulation skills. The primary therapeutic aim is to help the client recognize how short-term gratification interferes with long-term goals and to teach behavioral self-regulation strategies—such as tolerating delays, planning actions, and building discipline (Bernstein et al. 2005, Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Subjugation Schema

Individuals with the subjugation schema relinquish control to others in order to avoid negative outcomes such as conflict, anger, punishment, or emotional withdrawal. They often believe that their needs, desires, and emotions are unimportant to others (Velibaşoğlu 2014). The schema appears in two primary forms: (1) subjugation of needs and desires, and (2) subjugation of emotions (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

These individuals may suppress their own preferences in order to please others, abandon their desires in favor of others' wishes, and comply as though they genuinely want what others want. Otherwise, they fear that others will become upset, angry, punitive, or that they will feel overwhelming guilt. Additionally, due to intense fears of abandonment, they may feel compelled to satisfy others' expectations (Behary 2017). Overall, people with this schema tend to excessively accommodate others and may eventually experience anger, resentment, aggressive behaviors, or even substance misuse as a consequence of chronic self-suppression (Velibaşoğlu 2014).

The schema often originates in overly controlling parents (Young and Klosko 2015). In addition, neglectful family environments in which children's needs or emotions are ignored or punished when expressed are also common precursors (Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Metaphor: The Tree That Bends Not to Break

In a forest, there was a small tree. Every time the wind blew, the tree bent immediately. Long ago, a powerful storm had uprooted all the trees that stood upright and caused great destruction. After that day, the small tree learned never to resist the wind. It bent in whatever direction the wind blew. It was unaware of its strong

roots and sturdy trunk. Out of fear of breaking, it could not direct its own life. Years passed; storms became rare and winds mild. Yet the tree's habit of bending remained. Eventually, even its own shadow made it recoil.

Explanation

The essence of this metaphor lies in how the subjugation schema develops when a child learns to suppress their needs and emotions to avoid punishment, loss of love, or conflict. Over time, this learned bending becomes an automatic internal response: the individual begins to bend even when no one is exerting pressure. Therapy focuses on helping the individual recognize their suppressed needs, strengthen assertiveness, and regain the capacity to "stand upright" without fear.

Self-Sacrifice Schema

The self-sacrifice schema is characterized by an individual's chronic tendency to place others' needs, desires, or priorities above their own. These individuals feel an excessive responsibility to ease the burdens, pain, or discomfort of those around them. Although such self-sacrificing behaviors may initially function as a means of creating emotional closeness, they often lead to long-term exhaustion, resentment, and suppressed anger (Young et al. 2003).

People with this schema typically believe that they will feel guilty if they disappoint others, that they will be unloved if they set boundaries, or that they will be judged as selfish. This mindset leads to a relational pattern in which the individual consistently prioritizes others while relegating their own needs to the background (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

The roots of this schema often lie in family structures that place excessive emphasis on morality, responsibility, or altruism (Young and Klosko 2015). It is also observed in caregiving environments where parents themselves are overly self-sacrificing, placing the needs of others above their own. Additionally, when caregivers are inadequate, depressed, or emotionally immature, children may be forced to assume parental responsibilities, further contributing to the development of the self-sacrifice schema (Günaydin 2016).

Metaphor: You Cannot Pour Water from an Empty Pitcher

Imagine a pitcher with no water inside, surrounded by glasses continually reaching toward it. No matter how hard it tries—even squeezing itself to release its very last drops—it desperately wants to give more. Each moment it fails to pour, it feels inadequate, guilty, or useless. What it does not realize is that unless it fills itself first, it will eventually have nothing left to give.

Explanation

This metaphor illustrates how individuals who are constantly oriented toward others neglect themselves, ultimately leading to emotional depletion. The therapeutic goal is to help the individual learn to "fill their own emotional pitcher" first and to establish a healthy balance between generosity and self-preservation.

Approval-Seeking / Recognition-Seeking Schema

Individuals with the approval-seeking/recognition-seeking schema expend considerable effort to gain others' approval. Their primary aim is to meet their needs for acceptance, validation, and attention by conforming to others' expectations. For these individuals, self-esteem depends not on internal evaluations but on external responses (Rafaeli et al. 2019, Martin and Young 2010). Their externally based self-worth leads to extreme sensitivity to rejection. They may pursue approval through success, wealth, status, or physical appearance (Arntz and Jacob 2016).

This schema often originates in caregiving environments characterized by conditional love (Behary 2017). If children experience attention, affection, and acceptance only when they succeed or behave as expected, they may internalize the belief that love and approval are contingent on meeting specific conditions (Arntz and van Genderen 2009).

Metaphor: The Tree That Blossoms Only When Applauded

There was a tree with strong roots, though it was unaware of its strength. Every morning, it stretched its branches toward the sky, waiting for applause from those around it. When applause arrived, the tree blossomed and became vibrant. Yet when no one looked its way, it wilted and shed its leaves.

Explanation

In this metaphor, the tree represents a person who defines their worth through external reactions. Having grown up in an environment where love and acceptance depended on compliance or achievement, the individual loses contact with their intrinsic value. Like a tree that only blooms when applauded, admiration and validation become essential for their sense of self. Without applause, they feel worthless, invisible, or incomplete. This pattern drives them to constantly meet others' expectations at great personal cost.

Negativity / Pessimism Schema

Individuals with the negativity/pessimism schema tend to focus their attention on the negative aspects of life. They minimize positive experiences and generalize negative ones (Behary 2017). As a result, they believe that even minor mistakes will lead to disastrous outcomes, which creates an intense fear of making errors (Rafaeli et al. 2019). They also hold the belief that good events will inevitably be followed by bad ones, which keeps them in a continual state of anxiety and hypervigilance (Martin and Young 2010). As with all schemas, family dynamics play a significant role. This schema is often observed in families that consistently draw the child's attention to the dangers and negative aspects of life (Arntz and Jacob 2016).

Metaphor: The Telescope with a Cracked Lens

Imagine someone who always looks at the world through a telescope but its lens is cracked. As a result, the image appears shadowy, distorted, and threatening. Even when people smile, the crack in the lens makes their faces appear flawed. Yet the problem is not the world outside; it is the lens through which it is viewed. What requires intervention is not the scenery, but the way of seeing.

Explanation

This metaphor highlights how the negativity schema distorts perception, obscures positive experiences, and exaggerates risks. The therapeutic aim is to shift the individual's focus from trying to fix the external world to examining the internal lens that makes the world appear consistently negative.

Emotional Inhibition Schema

Individuals with the emotional inhibition schema feel a continuous need to control their communication and natural emotional expressions due to fears of being criticized or of losing control over their impulses (Behary 2017). According to Rafaeli et al. (2019), these individuals experience anxiety when expressing emotions openly because they believe doing so may lead to negative consequences such as abandonment, loss of self-respect, or harming others. Thus, they prefer to suppress their emotions in a rational and controlled manner.

As noted by Rafaeli and colleagues (2019), spontaneous and pleasurable impulses such as playfulness, enjoyment, and sexuality are often among the emotional expressions that are suppressed. The origins of emotional inhibition often lie in early life experiences in which efforts to express emotions were discouraged or invalidated.

Metaphor: The Silent Room

Imagine a child who is told to be quiet when they cry, told "don't exaggerate" when they laugh, and punished when they express anger. Over time, this child learns silence. In the large house they live in, the walls are soundproof. Storms rage inside, but from the outside nothing can be heard; no one knows. Within this silence, a part of the child's identity slowly fades.

Explanation

This metaphor represents an individual who carries a rich but suppressed emotional world yet cannot express it outwardly. The therapeutic aim is to open this “room” so the inner voice can once again be heard, and to help the individual view emotions not as threats, but as guiding, human experiences.

Unrelenting Standards / Hypercriticalness Schema

Individuals with the unrelenting standards/hypercriticalness schema exert excessive effort to meet the high expectations they set for themselves. This schema is characterized by harshness and extreme self-criticism. According to Behary (2017), individuals with this schema believe they must continually strive to reach their internally imposed standards of perfection in order to avoid criticism. Persistent striving leads to pressure, tension, and exhaustion, while promoting hypercritical attitudes toward oneself and others. It may also lead to diminished quality of life, impaired health, and reduced self-esteem (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

The origins of this schema are often found in family environments where love is conditional and persistent dissatisfaction is expressed (Young and Klosko 2015). This dynamic, combined with high expectations regarding responsibility and achievement, fosters perfectionism. Childhood and adolescence environments characterized by excessive achievement demands may strengthen or reinforce this schema (Young et al. 2003). The “demanding parent mode” commonly encountered in schema therapy is closely related to this pattern. This internal voice reflects internalized parental attitudes associated with disappointment and shame, and its expectations are nearly impossible to meet (Karaca and Gürsoy 2019). It pushes individuals toward harsh self-criticism and strict evaluation of others (Young et al. 2003).

Metaphor: The Measuring Stick That Is Never Enough

The individual carries an invisible measuring stick and evaluates the height of every task they perform against it. Yet the stick is always slightly longer than the completed work. No matter what they do, the inner voice says, “It should have been better,” preventing self-appreciation. The bar is perpetually out of reach because the individual lengthens it each time. With every adjustment, the standard becomes more unattainable.

Explanation

This metaphor symbolizes the rigidity of the individual’s internal critic and the exhausting nature of their self-evaluation process. In therapy, the primary aim is to help clients recognize the unrealistic length of this internal measuring stick and develop more flexible, realistic, and compassionate standards.

Punitiveness Schema

Individuals with the punitiveness schema believe that all mistakes whether made by themselves or others deserve harsh punishment. In this schema, forgiving or understanding mistakes is extremely limited or entirely absent. Even when they themselves commit an error, they feel unable to tolerate it and believe they deserve severe consequences. They assume that no mistake should go unpunished. People with this schema typically experience intense anger when confronted with wrongdoing (Karaosmanoğlu et al. 2010). They struggle to forgive because they also struggle to empathize (Rafaeli et al. 2019).

When others fail to meet their expectations, individuals with this schema often respond with punitive, rigid, and unforgiving behaviors. They have difficulty showing tolerance and may feel anger regardless of others’ intentions (Young et al. 2003). Early experiences with punitive caregivers, family members, or social environments contribute significantly to the development of this schema (Güler 2020).

Metaphor: The Harsh Judge Within

Imagine a courtroom in which the defendant is always the individual themselves. The judge strict, harsh, and unyielding never changes. Even the smallest mistake results in the gavel striking down with pronouncements such as “You are wrong,” “You are guilty,” “You have failed.” The individual is not granted the right to defend themselves. In this courtroom, empathy is forbidden. Although there are other courts

outside ones that allow compassion, learning, and growth the individual always ends up being convicted in their own courtroom.

Explanation

This metaphor symbolizes how the punitiveness schema rigidifies the internal judgment process and prevents the individual from offering themselves forgiveness or understanding. The therapeutic aim is to create space for compassionate self-defense to allow the individual to replace the harsh inner judge with a more humane and flexible internal voice.

Discussion

This study explored how early maladaptive schemas can be rendered more visible through metaphorical representations and how such representations may function within therapeutic communication. The findings suggest that metaphors help concretize abstract schema structures, making it easier for clients to develop both cognitive and emotional awareness. Similar findings are reported in the literature. For example, Angus and Greenberg (2011) emphasize that metaphors facilitate emotional processing, while Wirtz et al. (1988) note the critical therapeutic role of metaphors. Thus, the examples presented in this study are consistent with existing conceptual and empirical literature.

One of the major advantages of using metaphors is their ability to help clients express internal experiences without eliciting resistance. Metaphors make abstract and difficult-to-articulate experiences more accessible for both therapists and clients. Additionally, they strengthen the therapeutic alliance and contribute to the development of a shared symbolic language. However, potential limitations must also be considered. Metaphors are influenced by cultural context; a metaphor that is meaningful in one culture may not resonate in another. Furthermore, clients may interpret metaphors differently or inaccurately, which may negatively affect the therapeutic process. Some clients may have limited capacity for abstract thinking, which can further restrict the utility of metaphors (Karairmak and Güloğlu 2012).

From a clinical standpoint, the systematic use of metaphors represents a powerful tool for therapists. Integrating metaphors into essential components of schema therapy such as psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, imagery-based interventions, and behavioral tasks facilitates a deeper understanding of schemas. Moreover, using metaphors across therapeutic stages such as identification, elaboration, reframing, and transformation can enhance intervention effectiveness. In educational settings, metaphors can help psychotherapy students understand abstract theoretical concepts more easily and foster the development of clinical skills (Young et al. 2003).

In conclusion, metaphors are valuable tools that enrich therapeutic processes in both clinical practice and educational contexts. Nonetheless, cultural differences, clients' interpretive capacities, and the potential for misunderstanding must be carefully considered. Metaphors should be used flexibly and in ways that align with individual clients' needs. Future research should include empirical studies examining the effectiveness of metaphor use across different clinical groups, cultures, and educational settings.

This study also carries several limitations. First, as a narrative review of metaphor use in schema therapy, the findings do not allow for direct causal conclusions. Second, because metaphors are culturally shaped, the examples presented here may not be equally applicable across different cultural or clinical contexts. Additionally, much of the existing literature on metaphor use in therapy relies on qualitative or case-based examples; the scarcity of experimental and quantitative studies limits the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

This review examined the potential therapeutic contributions of representing early maladaptive schemas central constructs of schema therapy through metaphorical narratives. Due to their inherently abstract, complex, and intertwined nature, schemas are often difficult for clients to grasp directly, which may limit the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. In this context, metaphors appear to offer a meaningful

tool not only for strengthening the therapeutic relationship but also for enhancing cognitive and emotional insight.

The metaphors developed for each schema in this study aim to make the core beliefs and emotional themes underlying the schemas more visible, thereby helping both therapists and clients establish a shared language. In this regard, metaphor use may serve as a powerful tool that not only facilitates therapeutic communication but also supports the client's process of reorganizing their internal world.

Future research should include qualitative and quantitative investigations examining the effectiveness of metaphor use in schema therapy, as well as studies aimed at developing culturally informed metaphors. Such work would make valuable contributions to the field.

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