

Original Paper

Head + Heart + Hands-on - Concerning, Specific, Visual and Creative Methods in Psychotherapeutic and Psychosocial Conversations

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Abstract

This article describes how creative methodology can be applied to different types of professional conversations. The method is used in part in psychotherapeutic and psychosocial conversations with patients/clients and part in supervision with professionals working in human care professions.

Keywords

Taping, schema therapy, modes

1. Taping

Taping is a method that makes conversations visual and tangible by allowing the narrator to build up a scenario using figures and symbols that represent external and internal relations. The narrative thus becomes a palpable and detailed storyline. A visual creation.

The method was developed by Soltvedt (2005), a psychologist and child psychotherapist in Norway, who was also the brains behind the approach that came to be known as Child Oriented Family Therapy (BOF).

Taping is a “doing method”, an action-oriented method that transforms both the narrator and the conversation guide into two interacting players. Paradoxically, the person guiding the conversation can be more inquisitive, wondering and challenging, and can simultaneously be perceived as less questioning, which helps drive the process forward.

The narrative in taping can demonstrate an “outside-in” and “inside-out” perspective at the same time. In other words, it allows illustration of an external reality simultaneously with an internal one. The method can be applied in many different situations; it can be used to depict a conflict scenario, a vision, someone’s life story or two conflicting stories, a network around a person, an inner conflict or a set of

circumstances perceived as ambivalent.

In this upcoming illustration taping is combined with schematheory, and specifically with the modes concept.

2. Schema-therapy

As a psychotherapist, I use schema therapy as one of my theoretical bases. Schema therapy was developed by Jeffrey E. Young – considered the “father of schema therapy” – who discovered that traditional therapeutic methods were insufficient to tackle tougher issues.

Young therefore started work as early as in the 1980s on developing what is now an evidence-based psychotherapeutic model – namely schema therapy – that took as its starting points CBT, attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and gestalt therapy.

Schema therapy thus involves working with emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relation-related interventions (Young et al., 2003).

One of the fundamental concepts of schema therapy (Lockwood & Perris, 2012) is that we are all biological beings born with emotional needs. This core needs centre on having a safe and secure attachment – where we are met with understanding, care and acceptance. Another human need is autonomy, i.e. having the opportunity to develop one’s own identity, feeling of competence and independence. There is a similar need for mutuality in relationships, the importance of being validated and respected for one’s own emotions and needs. In the same way, spontaneity and playfulness, having the opportunity to investigate, be inquisitive and explore new directions are also considered to constitute an emotional need. As are having realistic boundaries, guidance and empathetic limitation.

This core needs have to be covered in close relationships with others so as to allow the possibility of healthy development and maturity. When this happens, we develop healthy living patterns, known as “adaptive schemas”. In situations where the fundamental patterns, i.e., our “schemas”, are frustrated, emotional wounds develop, which, according to the Core Emotional Needs Model, can all be linked to the fundamental core needs. The vulnerabilities (schemas) that are developed here are defined by a combination of the individual’s innate temperament and previously experiences. These vulnerabilities are dysfunctional patterns and consist of thoughts, emotions, memories, cognitions and corporeal reactions (Young et al., 2003).

When our emotional needs are not met, we develop emotional wounds – i.e. schemas – which can take the form of a sense of abandonment when we lack stable accessibility to a significant other. Another example is how a lack of empathy, love, guidance and care can activate a wound of emotional neglect (Perris & Gyllenhammar, 2014).

Even though the literature (Young et al., 2003; and Arntz & Jacob, 2013) describes various different schema modes, it has generally been agreed to divide modes into four categories: The first category is the “vulnerable child”. This mode comprises emotions such as anger, shame and fear. Our innate emotions.

The second category is called “the internal critic and the demanding side”. This includes attitudes we have internalised from significant role models during our lives. If we fail to resolve a situation, the inner critic can attack the vulnerable side by saying something like “This is just typical of you! You’ll never manage it. You’re utterly worthless.” The third category is “the detached protector”, who puts a lid on the unpleasant emotion, using means such as distraction. There are many ways to distract oneself: go shopping if you feel sad, or perhaps start eating with a view to dulling the feelings. The fourth category is called “the healthy adult side” and is linked to the safe and secure attachment; it is a side that is understanding and forgiving and which can assist in navigating in a healthy manner in the long term.

The objective of schema therapy is to change the vulnerabilities (the schemas) that prevent the individual from living a full life and developing into a healthy adult person who, independently, can protect and nurture his/her fundamental emotional needs.

3. Head, Heart and Hands-on

“Head, heart and hands-on” are key concepts that this action methodology comprises.

The Head stands for the cognitive component that allows an “outside-in” perspective and intelligibility of the context. *The Heart* represents an “inside-out” perspective, an emotional experience of the situation that can contribute to understanding, while *hands-on* corresponds to action in the situation in question, on the basis of intelligibility and understanding. Emotional learning is accorded a prioritized position as regards interactive processes that psychotherapeutic and psychosocial conversations with patients/clients entails and is termed the most effective component (a.a.).

In taping, the stage is variable. The narration can move through and between past, present and future. It can depict parallel happenings, and it can present an external and an internal reality at one and the same time. Figures can be moved back and forwards. All this facilitates the generation of reflections and the exploration of thoughts and ideas. In supervision, the group members can be invited to air their thoughts and ideas in a specific, tangible manner.

Supervision involves the use of Playmobil® figures, and the ones available represent people of different ages, genders and ethnicity. As they have moving parts, it is possible to highlight their expressions and attitudes by, for example, turning their heads, arms and legs, thus clarifying the relationship between those involved. They can stand close to one another, or far apart. They can turn to face one another or to face away from each other, depending on what is being played out on the stage.

In conjunction with the Playmobil® figures, symbols are used to make the narrative more finely shaded and illustrative. These include tangled balls of cotton that can be placed between figures to illustrate entangled, conflicted relations. There is also a stone, which can be used to represent a weight – possibly a mood of grief or depression. A heart can be used to symbolize a warm relationship. A transparent cube can illustrate a feeling of isolation or exclusion. A telephone can symbolize that the parties are communicating, while a fence can be used to indicate the opposite. The symbols are selected by the

narrator, who applies his/her subjective interpretation to them. In taping, the technique of externalization* can be applied through concretizing the externalized problem. For example, a stone can be used to illustrate someone's depression, thus separating the problem from the person so as to clarify that the person *is not* the depression. This also allows a "dialogue" between the person and the depression. Symbols for animals – such as a horse, dog, cat and bird – can be used to aid descriptions in the narrative. The figures need a delimited space – a stage where the action can take place. Tape and the fence symbol serve as external and internal boundaries in the narratives that take shape. An alter-ego figure functions as the narrator's representation of himself/herself, and in certain situations the supervisor may use an alter-ego figure in the supervision process. Wild and tame animal figures are used to express feelings and forces that find expression between those involved. For example, a bull can express powerfulness, while a little rabbit can be used to represent trepidation. A tortoise can be used to indicate how a person withdraws into his/her shell for protection, while a snake can be used to depict unreliability. The narrator chooses the symbols that express the emotions that need to be represented on the stage. The narrative receives support and emotional charge from tangible symbols. The actual image narrative presents a perception of a reality and the picture created remains clear in the memory.

In the upcoming illustration, case Benjamin, taping is combined with the modes concept in schema-therapy.

4. Case – Benjamin

Benjamin is a young man looking to talk about his life status. He wants to make a change in his relationship with his mother.

The therapist introduces the taping material and asks Benjamin to show the things that have been important in his background, as well as any influential factors he would like the therapist to be aware of.

Benjamin uses the tangible material to construct several scenarios on the table in order to illustrate several important "checkpoints" and events in his life. The taping material comprises a number of different parts: a stage to set the borders of where the narrative takes place; different figures to stand in for actual people; symbols to represent emotions, and details that can be linked to the situation with a view to increasing understanding.



Benjamin grew up in a family in the south of Europe, with a mother, father and older sister. The father dominated the family and was given to bursts of aggression linked to alcohol consumption. Heated arguments and raised voices were common in the home. Benjamin's mother tried to protect his big sister, who was regularly a trigger for the conflicts. As he was only young, Benjamin was usually forgotten in the conflict situations. No-one seemed to understand how the situation was affecting him. His father was an alcoholic, and many of the arguments were the result of jealousy. Benjamin shows and tells at the same time. His father was violent and aggressive, and Benjamin uses a ghost figure to symbolise the fear that he and the rest of the family felt. In the visual representation, the father is coming out from his own world, the mother is attempting to shield Benjamin's sister, and Benjamin is standing alone behind a fence. He is scared. Benjamin explains how he builds up a wall of cuddly animals on his bed to protect him, because no-one came to comfort and protect him. These situations deeply influenced Benjamin during his childhood. Fear of conflicts that degenerated into rows and sadness that no-one could see he needed comfort and protection. Fear and a lack of protection and boundaries are factors that affected Benjamin during his childhood.



The narrative jumps to Benjamin's teenage years. Benjamin reorganises the stage. His mother meets a new man and seeks refuge with him in another country. Benjamin goes with his mother. Brother and sister are separated. His sister, who now has substance abuse issues, stays with her father.

Benjamin finds himself in a new country where they speak a foreign language.

He has been ripped out of his old life and didn't have time to say goodbye to his friends. His mother is

fully immersed in her new relationship. Benjamin feels different in the new context: excluded and alone.

Benjamin uses the tabletop stage to demonstrate how the situation has changed. A fence represents the international border. A hash pipe symbolises his sister's substance abuse. In the centre of the image stand his mother with her new beau. Benjamin stands off to one side and he chooses a sad symbol to illustrate how the situation feels for him. In the visual representation, Benjamin stands with his back to the other people. He feels alone and overlooked – again. His teenage years were marked by break-ups and loneliness.



The narrative now jumps forward again and Benjamin uses figures and symbols to remodel the scene on the tabletop stage. Benjamin is now a young man; he is a student and has met a partner. On the tabletop stage, he now stands facing his partner. His mother has separated from her new husband and is living on her own in a different town. His mother is trying to make contact and Benjamin views her as intrusive. Benjamin avoids his mother's attempts to get in touch and he simply lets the phone ring when she calls. Benjamin chooses a bull to represent his mother's intrusive side. The fence symbolises the isolation in their communication, while the ostrich is used as a symbol for Benjamin's way of dealing with the situation. Just like an ostrich, Benjamin chooses to bury his head in the sand. He becomes evasive.



Benjamin's evasion serves as a form of protection for him. He is scared of being ambushed by feelings of guilt if he lets his mother into his life again. He is scared that her needs and lack of boundaries will take over. In the image, he illustrates what he is afraid of by lowering the protection between himself and his mother. The figure that represents himself has now fallen down. Next to him stands the Eeyore figure, symbolising the heavy, dejected and sorrowful emotions.

- "This is what I'm afraid would happen if I let my mother into my life again. I'd lose sight of myself."



Benjamin needs to change his situation from feeling dejected and run down to feeling that he has the right to have his own life, his own emotional needs, a healthy relationship with his partner, and to be able to set boundaries for his mother, who is intruding into his life. Using the materials, Benjamin shows what his ideal situation would look like. He is standing straight-backed, looking directly at his partner and his adult life. He places a heart between himself and his partner. He chooses two emotion symbols for himself: one symbolizes setting boundaries, it represents a figure saying "stop" to his mother. The other figure symbolises a healthy adult side, signalling that it is important to take care of his own emotional needs.

This visual representation is the last in the series of what Benjamin considers to have affected him during his life. He has a desire to have a healthy relationship with his mother and with his partner.

Listening to his own emotions and underlying needs, and daring to act on that basis will prove crucial in the process going forward. Together, Benjamin and the therapist work to play out situations that generated feelings of fear and sorrow. They have also examined new ways to handle the situation. They have done so on the table with dramatic figures and emotion symbols, and in the form of psychodramatic representation on the floor, using chairs and role reversal. They have also worked with visualisations based on key scenes from his life. In this way, unexpressed feelings and thoughts could be put into words. The different ways of working all include a cognitive processing, an emotional activation and an adaptive encounter, as well as a behavioural change in the form of an action.



During one visualisation, Benjamin is working with a situation that played out during his teenage years. He is sitting in his room when his mother bursts in and expresses her concern that Benjamin is strange. She is worried about his sexuality and that her son is going to follow in his father's footsteps.

- "You'll end up just like your father! You'll treat women badly!" she shouts.

Benjamin feels ashamed. He can neither defend himself nor set boundaries for his mother. He capitulates, stays sitting on the bed and feels worthless.

In this case, the therapist asks to participate in the situation that has arisen, and to enter into the visualisation. She tells Benjamin's mother that she needs to respect his boundaries, and to deal with her concerns herself. Her inner unease has nothing to do with Benjamin. She cannot simply burst into his room and act so uninhibitedly. The therapist asks Benjamin's mother to leave the room and let him be.

Afterwards, the therapist asks:

- "How do you feel now, Benjamin?"
- "It feels really good to have someone defend me. I'm not used to it," replies Benjamin.

In continuation of the conversation contact, Benjamin himself tried to set boundaries for his mother in different situations.

Benjamin grew up with a father who was violent and aggressive, and who scared him. His mother had capitulated in the situation and was incapable of protecting Benjamin, who was scared and tried to hide.



On one occasion, Benjamin arrives for a session and wants to talk about something important that has happened. Benjamin uses the taping material. He and his girlfriend had been to visit his mother over

the weekend, and an incident occurred on the Saturday, which Benjamin would like to illustrate. On the Saturday night, Benjamin and his girlfriend heard an argument break out between his mother and her new husband.

“I think you’re disgusting when you’re drunk,” shouts the husband. “Please ... don’t say that ...”

His mother sounds sad and afraid.

Benjamin and his girlfriend are afraid, too, and don’t know how to react.

Benjamin uses the visual representation to illustrate how the husband launches a verbal attack. He uses a cannon to symbolise his aggressiveness. The mother figure is lying down, defenceless and dejected. There are some bottles in the image to indicate that they were both drunk. Benjamin and his girlfriend are behind the fence, in another room. The emotion figures – in the form of rabbits – symbolise their fear during the incident.



- “I’m scared! Let’s lock ourselves in this room,” says Benjamin.
- “Urgh, how unpleasant! I’m scared. Let’s get away from here,” replies his girlfriend.



One side of Benjamin is absolutely terrified. This is a situation and a feeling he recognises from his childhood. But there is another side to him, too, one that is thinking “This isn’t right! We shouldn’t need to hide and run away!” Benjamin displays his fear using the emotion symbol in the form of a rabbit, and his thoughts about this being an unjust situation in the form of a big, strong bear.



Benjamin decides to do things differently. Benjamin goes out to the husband and says.

- “Get out of our house! Just go away!”



The man seems shocked to encounter opposition, and answers in surprise:

- “I can’t even stand to be here!” and leaves the house.
- “And don’t you EVER come back!” shouts Benjamin after him.



Benjamin feels both relieved and empowered. In a new situation, which reminds him of so many previous ones, he has acted in a different way. He has tapped into his anger to protect his territory. He has set boundaries and made the situation secure. Benjamin is satisfied. Satisfaction is a form of joy, a feeling that is linked to safety and security, and which has to do with the absence of unease. Benjamin has now created peace and calm both within and outside himself.

In the days that follow, his mother is both scared and angry about how the episode concluded. She feels

abandoned and alone, and she turns her anger on her son. The figures in the visual representation illustrate both the fear and the anger.

- “Now he’s going to leave me! And it’s all your fault!” says Benjamin’s mother.



Benjamin now has access to his healthy adult side, represented on the tabletop stage by a large bear. Benjamin thinks, “Yes, that is precisely how I’ve felt. This is how it’s always been.” This understanding gives him both a sense of calm and some perspective on the situation.



Benjamin makes a visual representation of both past and present at the same time, in order to understand the interrelationships in his history. He can clearly see how the pattern is repeating itself. The aggressive and violent men who have played roles in his various family constellations. His mother, who was unable to protect her son, and Benjamin himself, who has felt afraid both as a child and as a young adult.

- “I feel that this situation, where I was able to set boundaries for myself, marks a turning point in my life. I’ve gained greater access to my inner, healthy adult side, which can guide me to make choices that better accommodate my emotional needs.”

In conclusion, Benjamin creates a visual representation of himself and his healthy, self-compassionate adult side, which takes care of his own needs for protection and security. This is the picture he wants to remember. He picks up the camera and takes a photo.



In this illustration, tangible, visual and representative methodology in the form of a taping are used to tell a story. On the first occasion, Benjamin is asked to show the therapist what he thinks influenced him when he was growing up.

The therapist has the opportunity to come along on a journey by touching on a number of events (= checkpoints) in Benjamin's life. This provides the therapist with a good overview and some important information that will prove useful later in the process.

Together, they build up a shared image on the basis of what Benjamin relates. This turns into specific images they can circle back to in future conversations. Working at visual level reinforces the memory experience among the parties involved. The observer retains clear images. Just like Benjamin's final photo of himself and the big, strong bear, symbolising his healthy adult side, images of strength can provide hope and courage to the narrator.

The methodology makes it possible to switch between zooming in and asking for details, and zooming out to gain an overview of a course of events.

The visual way of working clarifies what is being highlighted in the narrative. If the point of emphasis is on understanding how a given course of events affected the person, the visualisation of the emotions the persons in question are experiencing becomes an important part of the processing.

When the methodology becomes a recurring element in the conversation, patterns of interaction become remarkably clear, as does the appearance of certain emotions.

When an emotional activation takes place in the client, the therapist needs to have an adaptive emotional encounter. It is especially important that when the client's vulnerability, founded on needs that have not been accommodated, is exposed, the therapist acts on the basis of limited reparenting. During Benjamin's visualisation, the therapist enters the narrative as a healthy adult and defends Benjamin's boundaries in relation to his mother.

In this way, Benjamin gradually gains greater access to his own healthy adult side and can then defend his own boundaries. In the situation where Benjamin steps in and sets boundaries on the drunk husband who has acted abusively towards his mother, Benjamin is acting on the basis of an inner, healthy adult side.

Schema therapy, which has provided an important basis for the treatment, has to do with understanding

the vulnerability, focusing on the vulnerable side so as to decrease the vulnerability and increasing the healthy, adult side of the person.

Having or developing a “healthy adult” mode entails being integrated in thought, emotion and action, as well as moving towards mutual satisfaction of needs in important relationships to others (Young et al., 2003).

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