Abstract

This study explores particular patterns of change that might unfold over the course of an intensive psychoanalytic treatment. Specifically, it attempted to partially map the forms of change that might take place in terms of a patient’s subjective experience and the meaning they attribute to it as reflected in their effort to express that experience in figurative language i.e. metaphors. The study relied on the treatment session transcripts provided in The Psychoanalytic Process: A Case Illustration (1972) by P. A. Dewald as the data set. The treatment described covered a period of two years and is partitioned by Dewald into three sequential phases.

Figurative language in general and metaphor in particular are essential forms of representation of subjective experience, as well as the transmitter of subjective experience in which clear markers of change in self-representation may be found. These markers are located and made visible within the patterns of a patient’s metaphors involving the dimensions of valence, intensity, and agency. Metaphor permits access to two important dimensions of human affective experience with regard to feeling states: intensity and valence. Briefly, the dimension of valence asks the question “What is the affective charge?” positive or negative? The dimension of intensity asks, “How strongly felt is the expressed emotion?” high or low? Examining metaphors for connotative meaning through use of a semantic differential scale (Osgood, 1957), agency is added in this study to the dimensions of valence and intensity. This third dimension of affective experience, a primary ego function, puts emotions in the context of relationship dynamics (doer and done to). Agency asks, “Who is doing unto whom?” Is the speaker active or passive? An additional dimension of Meaning was added, and asks, “Is this expression Literal or Figurative”?

Analysis of trend patterns across all four dimensions, show patterns that were coherent and revealed changes throughout the course of treatment. Particularly notable was the marked shift across all dimensions which occurred at the midpoint, and which corresponded with Dewald’s Middle Phase of Treatment, and his theoretical notions of the significance of a transference neurosis. A particularly notable finding was the fact that all shifts in subjective experience, even shifts that that could be seen as evidence of dysregulation, were achieved without any loss of the capacity to symbolize, as evidenced by the consistently high figurativity scores along the Meaning Dimension. There was the maintenance of high figurativity even under the press of sharp increases in negativity and intensity, which, from a psychodynamic perspective, could be suggestive of increased ego strength.

These findings underscore the usefulness of metaphor as a target of clinical listening.