The Creation of a "New Narrative":
The use of figurative language in the discourse of battered women

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Abstract

Based on twelve in-depth interviews at a battered women’s support center in Colima, Mexico in 1996, the following paper is an analysis of the figurative language used by battered women at different points of group therapy. This research compares the type of metaphors and similes used by participants at the beginning of the therapeutic process with those used by participants at the end of the same process. The research suggests that women at the beginning of therapy use figurative language to describe a low self-esteem and self-identity, whereas women at the end of the process use figurative language to describe stronger self-esteem and self-identity. The paper examines the way that participants use figurative language to describe feeling “stuck” in feelings of low self-worth, and also explains how figurative language can help women in the process of freeing themselves from this “stuck” feeling.
Introduction

Complicated feelings are difficult to describe objectively. Often, we have a hard time articulating our thoughts surrounding emotionally charged topics because the words at our disposal to describe our feelings seem trivial. Research has shown that many of us turn to figurative language in order to communicate these hard-to-describe emotions. The metaphors and similes that we use, hear, and reproduce are crucial to understanding our individual realities. According to Donald Meichenbaum, one of the founders of narrative therapy, metaphors “become ways in which individuals come to construe and construct ‘reality’” (Meichenbaum, 1998, p. 3).

Through years of experience working with patients with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Meichenbaum (1994) and others (White & Epston, 1990) have found that analysis of figurative language helps clients move forward with their lives. According to Meichenbaum (1994), clients with traumatic backgrounds tend to get “stuck” using the same metaphors and similes over and over again to describe their feelings about a past problematic event. In order to help a client move forward, Meichenbaum isolates this repetitive figurative language used by a client in his or her “old narrative,” and then works with the client to see how the figurative language can be altered or transformed into a “new narrative.” In other words, narrative therapy is the re-creation of an old story: “If we agree that reality is represented through language and social interactions, then it follows that through the use of language, reality can be changed if a person changes his or her story about a past event, then his or her thinking about reactions to the event will change as well” (Marvel, Huskey, Lerner & Thurlow, 1997).

Many battered women feel emotionally “stuck” and are looking for a way out of their “old narratives.” Some of these women have symptoms of PTSD (ruminations, flashbacks, and avoidance behaviors) due to their prolonged exposure to systematic emotional and physical violence. Others may not have classic PTSD symptoms, but nonetheless are affected adversely by their batterers’ violence. There is a need to analyze battered women's discourse, because such discourse offers a unique perspective on the visceral experience of abuse. Specifically, figurative language allows each woman the opportunity to describe her unique symbolic reality in the world. The act of analyzing these metaphors, then, is a precise way to understand the fundamental core of a battered woman's experience.

The following analysis of battered women’s discourse grows out of twelve in-depth interviews conducted at a battered women’s support center in Colima, Mexico. Analysis from these interviews shows a fundamental difference between the discourse of the participants in the early stages of group therapy and that of the participants having already finished the group therapy. Whereas each woman in the early stages of group therapy uses figurative language to suggest fragmented and unsatisfied sense of self, each woman in the last stages of the support program uses figurative language to suggest the creation of unified, integrated sense of self. This more complete sense of self gives these women a feeling of control over their lives, which allows them to move forward.

1. Not all abusive relationships are heterosexual; however, for the purposes of this paper, “battered women” will be defined as women who are battered by their male intimate partners. The pronoun “she” will refer to the battered woman; the pronoun “he” will refer to the abusive male partner.
Method

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted in May of 1996 with battered women seeking support services from the "Centro de Atencion a la Mujer, Griselda Alvarez, A.C." (CAM), the oldest battered women's support center in Mexico, located in the state of Colima. The CAM offers a woman various types of support in a specific sequence of stages. First, a woman takes part in twelve sessions of group therapy (one day a week for three months) during which she explores her feelings about the abuse and makes concrete decisions regarding her situation. Second, a woman goes to two group sessions about the law, where she learns about her legal rights and the divorce process. Third, a woman makes an individual appointment with a lawyer to begin the process of legal separation. There is additional support for women who are survivors of sexual abuse. It is not a requisite that each woman completes all of the phases; indeed, many women involved in the program never leave their batterers. Each woman decides what level of support she needs.

The participants interviewed for this study were at different points in the CAM’s support sequence. Six participants were interviewed directly after their second session of group therapy. Two participants were interviewed after their last session of group therapy. One participant was interviewed after her second informational session on the law. Three participants were interviewed two months after their last official visit to the CAM. All participants lived in the Mexican state of Colima and were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five. Each woman volunteered to tell her story and was interviewed once. Each interview was conducted in Spanish. Each participant answered open-ended questions about 1) her relationship with the batterer before seeking support from the CAM, 2) her experience at the CAM, and 3) her relationship with the batterer after seeking support from the CAM. Each interview was tape-recorded and lasted between an hour and hour and a half.

Of the twelve participants interviewed, eight used substantial figurative language to describe their feelings of self-esteem and self-identity resulting from the abuse. Of these eight, three used figurative language to describe increased self-esteem and positive self-identity resulting from the group therapy at the CAM; all three of these participants had finished group therapy at the time of the interview. The implications of the figurative language of all eight participants are discussed below.

Results and Discussion

Being “stuck”

In situations of domestic violence, a batterer often seeks to control the victim as much as possible through isolation and manipulation as well as physical and sexual aggression (Dobash & Dobash, 1992, Walker, 1984). As a result of this control, a woman’s self-esteem tends to decrease over time. In the following excerpts from interviews, participants use figurative language to describe a deteriorating of sense of self as a result of a partner’s abuse. These metaphors and similes imply being “stuck” and unable to see any way out of the downward emotional spiral.
Two participants, Ana and Mercedes, describe this “stuck” feeling by relating themselves to objects that are already “used up” or finished.

I used to feel like...a peel, without anything inside of it....really bad, you know?\(^3\)

I felt like gum....or a cigarette butt that you step on, without thinking about it.

In using the image of the peel, Ana describes her inability to value herself on the inside; she feels an absence of internal substance. The peel may be beautiful on the outside, but the external shell belies the lack of the tasty, nutritious fruit center. Here, Ana acknowledges that the image she presents to the external world is not an accurate representation of her low self-esteem. Without its inside fruit, the peel is disposable; the user does not need it any longer. In using this simile, Ana shows that she feels unimportant and pushed to one side because she is no longer useful.

In the second simile, Mercedes describes a similar feeling of expendability. By associating herself with cheap, disposable, unhealthy products that are manufactured for quick consumption, she implies that she is not valuable, either to herself or to her batterer. In the case of gum or cigarettes, the disposal of the object is much more violent than that of the fruit peel: the user easily crushes or flattens gum and cigarettes when he is finished using them. Implied in this simile, then, is the powerlessness that Mercedes feels in the presence of her batterer. The products she compares herself with are static, and no match for the shoe that crushes them, either with purpose (the cigarette) or through carelessness (the gum).

In the following two metaphors, Paloma and Beatriz use figurative language to describe the painful emotional results of not living up to a fixed ideal. As in the above excerpts, the following similes show an inability of these women to move forward in their sense of self.

I used to feel like.....a doll that had been tossed in the trash.

He made me feel as if I was a god, but also [as if I was] trash.

In each of the above metaphors, the participants set out ideals that they quickly contradict. In using the image of the doll in the first metaphor, Paloma associates herself with an object traditionally thought of as beautiful, well conserved, and, more than anything, wanted. Dolls figure prominently in the socialization of young girls; family and friends give girls dolls as gifts so that they will learn to be good mothers and caretakers. In Mexico, men often use the expression "muneca" as a term of endearment when speaking to or of their daughters, girlfriends, or wives. This expression carries with it an element of power because it implies that this woman or girl needs someone (a man) to take care of her. In addition, a doll is plastic, perfect object. It is an image with which a real woman, including Paloma, cannot compete. A doll does not have thoughts or feelings; the owner of the doll has authorization to determine its attributes, and he can

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\(^2\) Not her real name. All the names of participants have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

\(^3\) This excerpt, as well as all of the excerpts in this paper, have been translated from Spanish to English by the author.
change those attributes quickly, without warning. The manipulative and controlling behavior of abusive men is very much like the owner of this doll.

Taking the above implications of the word "doll" and adding them to the phrase "tossed in the trash," we can understand that Paloma feels betrayed as a result of the abuse. At one time, she felt cared for and loved by her husband, but now that he has abused her, she feels unwanted and discarded. The phrase also suggests that Paloma feels old, and implies the possibility of a new woman coming to take her place in her husband's affections.

Beatriz uses figurative language to describe a similar emotional drain of not measuring up to unattainable standards. A common practice of abusive men is to revere their partners in public discourse but abuse them in private. In this metaphor, Beatriz describes the damaging effect of this dichotomy on her self-esteem. A god is untouchable, intangible, and capable of wisdom that no one fully comprehends. Trash is something already touched and very common. The juxtaposition of these two distinct metaphors does not allow Beatriz room to position herself anywhere between the two extremes; she is in a lose-lose situation because she can never live up to one image and does not want to be associated with the other.

The oscillating dynamic described by this second metaphor is typical in situations of partner violence, and can cause women to doubt their judgement, adding to the damage of their self-esteem. Dutton and Painter (1993) argue that the important factor in abusive relationships is the attachment to the batterer involved. They explain that this type of attachment can only occur in situations where there is an alternation between positive and negative treatment: "What is essential to generating attachment is the extremity of both the good treatment and the maltreatment, and the temporal juxtaposition of one extreme with the other (usually maltreatment followed immediately by good treatment)" (Dutton and Painter, 1993, p. 615). These authors do not speak of a cycle (such as that developed by Walker, 1979 & 1984), which would be too predictable to the victim. Instead, they describe a random pattern of positive and negative actions towards the woman, where the positive actions generate affection and the negative actions constitute abuse. One participant, Alejandra, also explained this phenomenon when she spoke about the abuse of her partner. Each time that her boyfriend abused her, he would take care of her afterwards: bringing her ice, making her food, and taking her to the hospital. However, he never acknowledged his part in causing her pain. She said it was as if he were two different people at once, like Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. This confusing pattern of treatment causes her debilitating anxiety and stress that keep her “stuck” emotionally.

As a result of the feelings of inadequacy that battered women feel, they develop coping mechanisms to allow themselves to separate emotionally from their battered bodies and minds; however, these coping mechanisms only serve as temporary respites from situations that do not go away of their own accord. Thus, even if a woman is an excellent coping strategist, she also feels “stuck” in old patterns. In the following excerpt, Leticia uses a simile to describe this coping mechanism of disassociation.

*I wandered around with various brands of tranquilizer pills. I walked around like a zombie, without knowing where, when, or why...in other words, it is an experience I do not wish on anybody -- on anybody. It’s...it’s...it’s...like walking on false ground.*

Here, Leticia offers two similes to describe her coping strategies. The first, “a zombie,” conjures
up the image of a strange, ugly, and invisible creature. In being ugly and invisible, the zombie represents contradiction. In using this simile, Leticia shows that she feels as though no one considers her opinions as valid because she is either invisible or ugly. A zombie is a dead person that has not gone in peace from this world to the next. Much like a peel or a doll, a zombie is empty: without feelings or thoughts. Leticia uses this simile to describe her anxiety at not feeling at peace, for feeling empty inside, and for giving the appearance of being alive when in fact she feels dead.

In this context, Leticia also uses this metaphor to explain her sensation of being outside her body. Many battered women interviewed describe the phenomenon of leaving their bodies during their partners’ violent episodes. It is their way of surviving the abusive episode without feeling their partners’ emotional and physical punches. In this example, Leticia describes the process of disassociating herself consciously through the use of tranquilizer pills. The effect of these pills allows her to remain in an altered state and thus survive her partner’s abuse.

In her second metaphor, “walking on false ground,” Leticia recognizes the futility of her “zombie” coping strategy. She knows that the pills are not helping to change her situation. She feels as though the world that she has created to escape her reality is unsure and unstable. Similar to the other participants, this knowledge causes her significant anxiety, and keeps her in a continually debilitating cycle of self-doubt.

**Becoming “un-stuck”**

As women go through therapy, their feelings about themselves tend to become more positive. Some of the activities from the CAM support group are designed to use metaphor to make women aware of this change in themselves as it occurs. In the following excerpt, Esperanza describes how such an activity at the CAM made her conscious about her need for a “new narrative”:

*The first day I remember that they said that we needed to draw a doll that represented how we felt about ourselves, you know? I remember exactly that in that moment, I closed my eyes and started to think hard. Who am I, right? Or, what do I look like? And I remember grabbing a sheet of paper and drawing a fat doll, a fat, dismembered doll -- broken all over her body. And I remember that I put a lot of lines through the drawing for all the problems, all the things that I had gone through. I drew three paths…. On one I really wanted to put alcohol, but I was embarrassed so I didn’t put it there, but in my mind it was there. And then [on the next path], for security, I drew a tree...and on the other path I put tons of crosses in the middle of the path. In my mind that path was him -- the path of staying with my partner. And I drew headphones on the doll and I put a Walkman around her waist...because all the time, I would be like that, you know? All the problems and all the things, I lived through them all, but always with the radio on, you know? It was my escape. My way of forgetting about my things. That, and the bottle. I remember clearly that after drawing the doll, I felt good. I felt good because of the discussion that all of us had and what the woman said we*
were going to study, what we were going to get out of these group sessions, I remember that I thought, ‘In six months, this doll isn’t going to be like this. This doll is going to be different.’

Here, Esperanza uses metaphor to describe a dramatic moment of realization, where, suddenly, she can see her capacity for change. Esperanza has very specific constructions of meaning for every one of her metaphors: the doll, the bottle and the crosses. These metaphors are unique to her identity. She then uses one of these metaphors, the doll, to embody the ensuing evolution of her identity. The process she describes is similar to that used by Meichenbaum and others to help clients create “new narratives.” The goal of these therapists is to find small pockets of hope in clients’ “old narratives” in order to help those clients develop new stories about the past problematic events (Freedman & Combs: 1996, p. 46). The act of physically drawing her metaphor allows Esperanza herself to recognize and name the pockets of hope in her “old narrative.” The drawn image is helpful to Esperanza in identifying the aspects of her life she wants to change. She then takes the narrative away from the paper and speaks of changing a “doll.” She wants to work actively to change her emotional and physical well being, and, for her, the three-dimensional doll represents this remodeling. Here, Esperanza appropriates the image of the doll, naming herself its owner. Unlike Paloma’s metaphor of the doll in the first category, Esperanza is in control of the doll. Through expressing the desire for a “new narrative,” Esperanza implies that she is worth changing for; she recognizes the need for an intact, fulfilled sense of self.

As Esperanza’s words show, the focus of the CAM’s therapy is to help women move forward with their lives. Whereas Ana, Mercedes, Paloma, Beatriz and Leticia use figurative language to describe the way they felt during the abuse, but do not offer any new figurative language to denote their emotional changes as a result of therapy, each of the three participants interviewed after having attended the entirety of the CAM’s support groups -- Rosa, Teresa, and Esperanza -- use figurative language to report an increase in self-esteem and healthy interactions with others. This data suggests that exposure to the CAM’s support group discussions and activities may play a role in helping women to move from their “old narratives” to “new narratives.” In other words, this therapy helps them get “unstuck.”

The figurative language of these three participants offers a contrast to the language of the other participants. In each of the three participants’ stories, we see evidence of a strengthened emotional self. As a result of this stronger self-knowledge, each participant takes a more active and informed role in her life and in the lives of those around her: Rosa is able to set limits; Teresa feels in control of her decisions; Esperanza leads her family with communication.

In the first example of personal inner growth, Rosa describes a radical shift towards self-awareness and self-love:

*The therapists at the CAM have helped me to rip...the bullets out of my chest....I found out that I existed, that I am. I rediscovered my body. [I learned to] feel like a person, know that I am a person [after he had] treated me like a donkey.*

In this excerpt, Rosa uses figurative language to explain her sense of reclaimed identity. As seen in earlier metaphors, she communicates a sense of past violence and degradation with words such
as “bullets” and “donkey,” but then offers other metaphoric language to fight these previous definitions of herself. In ripping the bullets out of her chest, she is taking action. She decides to remove the violence of her husband from her physical and emotional self. The absence of his outside control over her allows her to recognize herself as whole and separate from him: “I found out that I existed. I rediscovered my body.” She is then able to define herself as a person, a separate individual who is unique and valuable.

Due to her now strong sense of self, Rosa is able to take concrete action in setting necessary limits:

_I came to the CAM to know who I am. Now…I do know who I am, and I do know what I want. I know that I can defend myself, no one will ever attack me again, and no one is going to make me do what I don’t want to do….I have learned to draw my line [in the sand]._

In this statement, Rosa says that she cares about herself, and because of this self-love, she has learned to set limits. Her use of the possessive adjective “my” in her metaphor underscores her feeling of control.

Teresa also uses metaphor to show how she has taken sole control over her identity and self-esteem:

_I felt that I was no longer the same one who had arrived. That in three months -- that is what is incredible -- I felt like someone else. Now I go out with ease. I don’t have to ask permission from anyone. I am my only guardian, and, well, I feel surer of myself._

In contrast to the previous excerpt, where Rosa described the process of pulling herself together to create a whole self-identity, here Teresa describes her self-identity as completely separate from her previous self. Indeed, the very point of her metaphor is that she is now a different person after having gone through group therapy. However, looking carefully at the language that Teresa uses, it is clear that, like Rosa, she is in fact building off of an “old” metaphor to create her “new narrative.” Teresa uses the metaphor of the “guardian” to describe the progression from her “old” sense of self to her “new” sense of self. In saying that she is now a different person and that she is her “only guardian” Teresa implies that she has not always been in sole control of her identity. In saying that she now leaves the house whenever she wants, without asking permission, Teresa implies that she did not always feel as free as she currently acts. Thus, by saying that she now feels like her “only guardian,” Teresa is appropriating the metaphor that once controlled her. Much like Rosa, she now is in charge of her decisions, feelings, and actions. She has found a way to use the “old” concept of “guardian” to her advantage.

In addition to appropriating “old” metaphors into “new” stories, survivors of deeply traumatic histories can benefit from “exposing dominant discourses” (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In other words, when people can understand their problems within a greater societal context, they are more able to see an issue from different points of view, and, as a consequence, are able to see a way out. In domestic violence situations, batterers tend to isolate their partners, and, as a result, the victim is only able to see herself and her situation from one point of view. As a battered
woman meets others and begins to talk about her situation with people other than the batterer, she suddenly has access to many more points of view about her situation. She realizes that her batterer’s argument in defense of his actions is not the only valid discourse. Once a woman is able to see that her partner’s “dominant” discourse is not the only discourse, she can feel ‘un-stuck’ and able to move forward in solidifying her own identity.

Returning to Esperanza’s interview, we see that her exposure to the dominant discourse is the catalyst for her increased self-esteem:

*He always used me as…an object. He didn’t care what I felt, only what he felt, what he wanted….He closed my world. The world came crashing in on me. For me, [the CAM] was like a path that opened up when I did not know where to turn, this path opened up for me….Now I feel as though I am someone else. For me, the CAM has been the door to heaven.*

Here, Esperanza says that her husband “closed her world” and that the “world came crashing in” on her. This metaphor shows the isolation she used to feel resulting from her husband’s overwhelming control, and also implies that this isolation caused her to be unable to see outside of her husband’s opinion of her. Esperanza then contrasts this previous self-identity with her “new narrative,” calling the CAM a “path” that allowed her to move outside of her husband’s discourse in order to find her own sense of identity, which she calls “heaven.” Here, like Rosa’s “whole body” and Teresa’s “guardian,” Esperanza’s “world” is a concrete example of an “old” metaphor being altered to be part of a “new narrative”; by the end of her statement, the world is not longer “crashing in” on her, but instead is a place from which she feels confident to contemplate “heaven.” Whereas Rosa and Teresa use metaphors to describe their personal growth as an individual accomplishment, Esperanza uses her metaphor to show that her personal growth was a result of seeing her situation in a greater societal context. She sees the CAM’s message of women’s solidarity as crucial to her “new identity.”

As was the case with Rosa’s “new narrative,” Esperanza’s newly discovered sense of self has caused concrete changes in her actions towards her children, which she also describes with metaphor:

*I scolded, and abused my children a lot….I took all of my resentment out on them…it was my way of letting it all out, it was my escape....What I couldn’t do to him I did to my kids. I hit them...but what I did more was to scream at them. Now, I talk to them and I don’t yell at them anymore. We are all a team, we all have to work together.*

Here, Esperanza describes her family unit as a “team.” The word team implies that everyone is working together for the good of the group, each member equally respectful of the others. Whereas Esperanza was physically and verbally abusive towards her children before arriving at the CAM, she now takes the time to talk through problems with her children, because she feels worthy of being respected by her children. By calling her family a “team”, Esperanza makes a commitment to her family’s unity. This decision places her as the leader of the group, the
“captain” of the “team”. By assuming this position, Esperanza once again shows her solid sense of self.

Conclusions

Whether they are at the beginning, end, or middle of the therapeutic process, participants use figurative language to describe their feelings and self-identity as a result of male partner violence. Three of the participants who had finished the CAM’s therapeutic cycle -- Rosa, Teresa, and Esperanza -- also use figurative language to describe a significant increase in self-esteem and self-identity as a result of group therapy. The words of these three participants in particular support Meichenbaum’s theory that “new narratives” can be made from “old” stories; the similes and metaphors they use to describe their current strong sense of identity are created from the figurative language they use to describe their low self-esteem stemming from their batterers’ abuse. The independence, strength, and self-love shown in these three participants’ metaphors serve to support Meichenbaum’s own observation: “Clients, over the course of therapy, as they improve, often shift the focus of their accounts. They now move from viewing themselves as victims to becoming survivors -- if not thrivers” (Meichenbaum, 1998, p. 2).

This small qualitative study serves as a point of departure for future studies about the relationship between figurative language and therapy for battered women. In particular, the following considerations are important when planning the next step of research:

(1) In this particular process, all interviews were conducted in one sitting, at a particular time in each woman’s personal growth. In every interview, participants described their current emotional states in relationship to their past feelings; all of the figurative language used to describe their emotions during the abuse were stated in the past. Thus, the participants’ descriptions of how they felt during the abuse were recollections rather than immediate reactions. In order to understand the way in which a woman’s unique figurative language evolves as a woman goes through therapy, it would be necessary to interview the same participants many times during the therapeutic process.

(2) Also necessary is a study about the way in which group therapy shapes the formation of women’s metaphors and similes. Meichenbaum (1994, 1998) and others (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990) concentrate the majority of their work in narrative therapy on the individual client/therapist relationship. Central to Meichenbaum’s theories on narrative therapy is that each person develops his or her unique figurative language to help cope with a given traumatic problem. It is crucial, then, to know how the dynamic of metaphor-formation changes when many people with similar external stressors (in this case battered women) come together for support. In a group therapy situation, how do the women borrow, appropriate, and change the figurative language of the other women in the group? Does each woman create her own figurative language to explain her emotions? What is the viability of a woman’s “new narrative” if her figurative language is not her own?

(3) Particularly relevant to any study on figurative language is the linguistic background of the researcher. Theorists such as Amy Kaminsky (1993) remind us that the process of
creating a metaphor does not exist in a vacuum; metaphor necessarily is a cultural
expression. In this particular case, the researcher is a woman from the United States,
whose first language is English. She has analyzed the metaphors using a mixture of her
own background and her various experiences living in Latin America. It is possible that
this combination may alter results somewhat; therefore, the next study should take into
account the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of its researchers as it determines its data-
gathering and analysis needs.

Ultimately, this type of analysis shows the power of the spoken word. Helene Cixous
(1989) tells us that, for many women, a great torture is to begin to speak and use language. After
having overcome the fear of the spoken word, a woman feels free and powerful. Julia Kristeva
(1989) maintains that creative language is the medium by which a woman manifests and processes
the insecurities within her own identity. In order to help support women in abusive relationships,
it is crucial to pay attention to the figurative language they use to describe their deepest emotions.
As shown in the words of the women in this study, the act of re-creating and re-appropriating
these metaphors and similes fosters a deeply fulfilling sense of self which is increasingly equipped
to set healthy limits in relationships with others.

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