

The Identity Archetypes and Self-Esteem: a Symbolic Analysis of Therapeutic Stories within Creative Improvisation through Literature

Vasile Constantinⁱ, Alexandru-Filip Popoviciⁱⁱ

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Psychology Department, University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Introduction: *Creative improvisation through literature is an Experiential Unifying technique which fosters the client's personal development process and heals some of their emotional wounds, by analyzing the metaphors projected in the client's stories.*

Objectives: *The present study aims to explore the way metaphors revealed within the creative improvisation through literature intervention correlate and facilitate the integration of archetypal identity roles (feminine, masculine, maternal and paternal) and the increase of self-esteem level.*

Methods: *Through the content analysis of 400 stories created within the personal development groups, designed to validate the above-mentioned technique, we extracted metaphors connected with self-esteem, but also linked with the four archetypal roles, in order to observe if there is any correlation between the two features.*

Results: *We were able to see that self-esteem is closely connected to the increased frequency of archetypal roles revealed through metaphors from the therapeutic stories.*

Conclusions: *Through symbol analysis in an Experiential Unifying group, participants started to develop more creative-adaptive mechanisms to better cope with challenges.*

Keywords: *metaphor, Experiential Unifying psychotherapy, personal development, creative-expressive techniques, qualitative research*

*

* *

ⁱ Corresponding author: Vasile Constantin, PhD, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Panduri 90, Sector 5, 050663, Bucharest, Romania, email: vasileconstantin87@gmail.com.

ⁱⁱ Corresponding author: Alexandru-Filip Popovici, PhD, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Psychology Department, University of Bucharest, Panduri 90, Sector 5, 050663, Bucharest, Romania, email: filip.popovici@unibuc.ro.

I. Introduction

Creative improvisation through literature is an Experiential Unifying technique used in personal development and psychotherapeutic processes, which can be used within a group intervention or even in an individual therapeutic process (Constantin & Mitrofan, 2018). The development of such technique started from the premise that, similarly to any other expressive-creative techniques, it may be used to challenge the clients in an Experiential Unifying manner. This may lead to a behavioral unlocking, an increased access to repressed emotions or the re-signification of those experiences that generated an existential bottleneck (Mitrofan, 2008). At the beginning of each personal development session, through literary improvisation, participants were given the task of performing a provocative exercise: to write a story, in no more than 15 minutes, on a topic settled by the trainer. After the first step, participants shared their stories and, under the guidance of the therapist, they could uncover the meanings of the metaphors present in their stories. In that context, it was essential that the therapist be very careful in his observations, noting the clients' verbal, nonverbal and, above all, symbolic behaviors (Constantin, 2018). Previous studies (Constantin, 2016; Constantin, 2015; Constantin et al., 2015) reveal the positive effects of the intervention using creative improvisation through literature in increasing the self-esteem and decreasing anxiety levels. At the same time, the intervention by means of this technique also determines an increase of emotional intelligence (Constantin & Mitrofan, 2018). Also, the symbolic-experiential value of creative improvisation through literature is emphasized (Constantin, 2015, 2018). The metaphors that the client is projecting within their stories correlate with certain events or experiences that they did not process or integrate. Moreover, creative improvisation through literature is a tool for the symbolic reading of metaphors we find in participants' stories. Deciphering these symbols can help clients better understand their experiences, find their roots and, last but not least, unlock their repressed emotions (Mitrofan, 2004).

The purpose of this study is to observe the way creative improvisation through literature consciously brings out, through metaphors, the identity archetypes which exist within one's life. Jung described the Archetypes as emblematic motives of the human experience in the unconscious. They evoke deep emotions and behaviors that define us at all levels: intellectual, emotional, moral or relational (Jung, 1971).

Of all the archetypes, the ones related to the identity (feminine, masculine, maternal and paternal) are the most significant in someone's personality.

According to Mitrofan (2004), each person can be seen as a meeting point of the fundamental natural principles of evolution and integration, as an individualized, unique, unrepeatable unification and connection of the four manifestations and universal informational energy forces – Fire, Water, Air, Earth. Thus, their polar attributes translate into the functionality of the psychic and human behavior, through the relevant roles of their identity (paternal – Fire, maternal – Earth, masculine – Air, feminine – Water). The four fundamental elements are interconnected in opposite pairs – double and mutual influence and transformation: while some attributes are regenerating, enriching, creatively transforming and marked by evolution, others are blocking, annihilating or transforming their destructive essence. The author points out that, for each role represented by the four fundamental symbols, there are certain characteristics, or other derived elements of the archetypal symbol, each of them outlining and helping to decrypt the symbolic messages transmitted by a person, the possible blocks or the unresolved unconscious conflicts. Thus, Fire, the paternal element, is also associated with the Sun, the idea of creation and creator, of God or authority and the specific attributes are: responsibility/ irresponsibility, power/ weakness, domination/ submission. Air, or the masculine element, may take many forms, depending on its polarized attributes. Thus, Air can come as a gust, wind, storm, hurricane, or anything that “floats”, flies, is carried or transmitted. Among the masculine attributes, corresponding to the Air element, we mention: mobility/ rigidity, initiative, courage/ fear, enthusiasm/ sadness, etc. The feminine element, Water, is associated or substituted with other related symbolic elements: as any form of aquatic landscape (spring, river, sea, lake, etc.), drops of rain, ice or other liquid elements, flowing (e.g. blood, inside the body), and among the attributes of femininity, we mention: purification/ contamination, fluidity/ rigidity, empathy/ antipathy, etc. Finally, the maternal element, Earth, can be associated with any form of landscape that has in its composition soil or other strong natural elements, bearing attributes of the fertility–infertility polarity: plains, hills, mountains, rocks, sand, desert, marshes, or even substitute elements corresponding to the uterus/ womb – containment and protection (caves, vases, shapes which can hold). We mention the following polar attributes

specific to this element: containment/ rejection, germination/ sterility, affectivity/ distance (Mitrofan, 2004, p. 207).

II. Methods

The aim of the study

To understand how metaphors revealed within the creative improvisations through literature techniques correlate with and facilitate the integration of archetypal identity roles (feminine, masculine, maternal and paternal) and self-esteem.

Hypothesis

We assume that there is a positive and statistically significant correlation between symbols of the identity roles present in the metaphors of the therapeutic stories and self-esteem.

Participants

This study included 120 subjects, with ages ranging from 20 to 33 years, who took part in the personal development groups carried out for the validation of the creative improvisation through literature technique. The group sessions were carried out on a period of 12 weeks, process in which participants were challenged to write, at each meeting, a short story, on a given topic, with the goal to optimize their behavior.

Instruments

The study is a qualitative one and envisages the analysis of 400 stories gathered from the aforementioned participants, throughout the research program. The main instrument for conducting the study was the technique of creative improvisation through literature. As stated above, during each session, participants were invited to write a story, on a topic established by the facilitator. Later, each of them went through a process of personal analysis within the group. The analysis was centered on the metaphors contained in the story. For this paper, at the end of the group intervention, we performed a content analysis of the 400 stories, to highlight the metaphors associated with identity roles, in connection with self-esteem. Moreover, we used the method of observation in the process of assisted self-analysis, but also in extracting the key metaphors for this study.

Procedure

The first step of this study was to reveal the connection of the metaphors, present in the 400 stories

(literary improvisations), with the four fundamental natural elements: Water, Air, Fire, and Earth. In the personal development group, we sought to decipher the symbols which resonated with these four fundamental elements and the attributes that manifested themselves, in both directions of the polarities, as signs of integration or, on the contrary, of non-integration of certain attributes. We think that this type of research outlined an expressive technique, with metaphors that emerge as projections from the personality structure of the participants, with diagnostic valences too, as it offered the possibility of revealing certain events or unintegrated/ unprocessed experiences. In analyzing the 400 stories from which we extracted metaphors with the symbolic load, we also focused on the participants' life stories. However, the repetition of certain symbols from one person to another led us to underline a certain universality of metaphors (as the four fundamental elements are also universal). We would like to point out that any symbolic reading of this type can be enriched with other symbols and metaphors, related to the four elements mentioned above (and their additional specific attributes) – the use of this technique being transcribed in an Experiential Unifying manner, which allows to add other symbols or even to reformulate the initial ones, as the dynamics of a person's experience are restructured, offering them new perspectives to read it. Below, we will present the metaphors related to the identity symbols, extracted from the 400 stories created by the participants within the personal development groups through literary improvisation, metaphors resonating with the four fundamental elements. Since some of these have been repeated, from one participant to another, we will present them only once (as we call them unique metaphors). Also, in some cases, we will provide some explanatory notes, to better reveal the context of the occurrence of one metaphor or another.

Symbols and metaphors related to paternal attributes (corresponding to the FIRE element):

- Sunrise;
- Warm; Warm look;
- Solid;
- Strong;
- Strong rules;
- Protective arm;
- Insecurity (expression of security/ insecurity polarity – the absence of a paternal image);
- God (“he felt as if he had lost God”) (the expression of a possible traumatic experience related to paternity, or occurring on the paternal

- line: losing one's father, the father is gone, absent father);
- Hot day; Heat;
- Healing (from illness);
- Wisdom;
- Shadow (expression of the non-integration of the paternal attributes, sun in the shade, rejection of the paternal image); Faded light corner;
- Sunset;
- Ball (sphere shape);
- Summer;
- The pillar of the house;
- Sun ("sunny day", "cloudy day/ gloomy day", "the sun is setting");
- "It shall dry if it allows the sun to warm/ heat it (rejecting the paternal image, or related paternal attributes, poor relationship with the father);
- "I am the sun... [and I generate too much heat]" – (over-assuming/ overwhelming paternity, role confusion, parentification);
- Light.

Symbols and metaphors related to masculine attributes (corresponding to the AIR element):

- Rebellion, Angry/ Hostile tone (unintegrated polarities, anger, aggression);
- A multitude of clouds;
- "The fortress of the clouds";
- Coldness;
- Strong;
- "Cold Planet";
- Air ("cannot reach the air");
- Storm, Hurricane (unintegrated anger);
- Slender; Astute;
- "Fly with the wind";
- "I like to feel the wind";
- Unseen weapons;
- Soldiers; Fight (expressions of the attribute of force, of power, of fighting);
- Crass; Mister "Faded Colors" (polar attributes not integrated, rejection of masculinity);
- Lightning;
- Wind;
- To start energetically;
- Fog;
- Leader;
- Rigidity (appears opposed to spontaneity – even a blockage of spontaneity, not assuming the attribute);
- Chills ("he felt chills down the spine");
- Harshness;

- To float;
- Open air;
- "There was no blast of wind" (at symbolic level, an expression of lack/ non-integration, blockage of masculine attributes);
- Heavy breathing (possible non-assumption or rejection of masculinity and masculine attributes);
- To run;
- "Not being courageous" (polarity – blocks the level of the masculine attribute of "courage, strength");
- "The young bird started to fly"; To fly;
- Fresh air;
- Spring.

Symbols and metaphors related to feminine attributes (corresponding to the WATER element):

- Seduction;
- To spring;
- Sensitive;
- Calm;
- Sadness;
- Fatigue;
- Woman-spy (tendency to ensure masculinity to the feminine image);
- Rainbow;
- Shyness;
- Rain ("I am the rain") (awareness in assuming the feminine attributes);
- Slender ribbon of water/ river (fear of running, feeling unseen as a woman, poorly shaped feminine attributes);
- Flower;
- Princess;
- Tenderness;
- Pool;
- Perfumed;
- Water overflowing (over-assuming femininity, excessively feminine attributes);
- Honey;
- Unwept tears (not allowing tears to flow; repression of feminine attributes; rejection of femininity);
- Vapors;
- Bridge;
- Fountain;
- Lake;
- Slender, weak;
- The depth of the sea;
- Empty shell;

- To reach the shore (femininity seen as a burden, non-acceptance, non-integration of feminine attributes);
- Moist grass;
- Clear eyes;
- Winter;
- Snow.

Symbols and metaphors related to maternal attributes (corresponding to the EARTH element):

- Prehensile plants; Ivy;
- Trees;
- Steep mountains; Rocky hill (infertile soil, harsh – not assuming maternal attributes, mother who cannot contain or give affection to her baby);
- Hill; Green hill;
- Glass bowl (matrix symbol of the uterus; uncertainty related to fertility and maternity; pregnancy with challenges);
- Box; Dusty box (the box can be associated in this context with the uterus, with its capacity to contain; dusty box – destabilizing relationship with the mother; perceived danger on the maternal line);
- Gentle face;
- “The jungle outside”;
- To tailor (to model, to give birth);
- “Tree full of fruits” (expression of fertility);
- The autumn;
- Bent, crouched (as expression of fusional relations, lack of separation from the mother, fetal position);
- The queen;
- To care after someone (over-assuming maternal attributes; acting from the maternal role);
- “He wants me by his side”;
- “He hadn’t met his mother”;
- Stonewall; Wall: empty, white, high, cold;
- Desert (infertility, rigidity, rejection of maternal attributes);
- Sand;
- Stinging cactus (the expression of the danger of integrating maternal attributes: the soil bears the fruit of stinging plants; which produce pain);
- Unbreakable land; Insecure terrain; Unstable place (fear of abandonment in relationship with the mother);
- Mill stones;
- Road; Crossroad;
- Field.

Summarizing all the above, we note the following: after having analyzed the 400 spontaneous stories written by participants in the personal development groups, we managed to highlight 130 unique metaphors, with correspondence to archetypal symbolism. Their frequency is 32.5%, of the total literary improvisations. Of these:

- 23.8%, i.e. 31 symbols, correspond to the feminine identity role;
- 26.9%, i.e. 35 symbols, correspond to the maternal identity role;
- 29.2%, i.e. 38 symbols, correspond to the masculine identity role;
- 20%, i.e. 26 symbols, correspond to the paternal identity role.

The second stage in the qualitative study was to capture, in the 400 analyzed stories, the metaphors with resonance at the level of self-esteem. As such, we start from the premise that in the experimental group there were changes in this variable during the research program (Constantin, 2016). For this analysis, we have created an exploration grid, to facilitate the reading of such symbols. In the construction of this grid, we took into account, on one hand, the self-esteem level of the participants in the development group and, on the other hand, the possibility that this variable reveals symbols that depict the state and the experiences they go through. We present below the symbolic exploration of the metaphors grid, metaphors with correspondence to the self-esteem indicators found in the stories from the qualitative study:

- *Expressions referring to the self-image: body, face, bodily defect;*
- *Expressions with correspondence to personal attributes and characteristics with a negative connotation;*
- *Attributes and characterizations of other people/ characters that reflect the distorted and negative body and personality images.*

Below, we have extracted the metaphors associated with self-esteem, as evidenced by the content analysis of the 400 literary improvisations:

- Mask (a translation of the idea of hiding one’s identity; the shame of appearing as one is, fear of being vulnerable, of rejection);
- Evil (evil being);
- Sensitive;
- Shyness;
- False smile (inauthenticity, shame, fear of appearing as one is);

- “She doesn’t feel well in her own skin” (rejecting her own identity, not accepting herself);
- Piercing look;
- Cracked, bent posture;
- Porcelain face (an expression of emotional mortification; stagnant image, expressionless, lack of life);
- Myopia (“I am myopia” – assuming the ghostly distortion of personal characteristics – “everything looks blurry and small”; “I am «small»”);
- Weak;
- Mannequin without a soul (emotional mortification, lack of vitality);
- Taciturn;
- Stranger to his own family (rejection of family traits, of what is transmitted from predecessors, rejection of the expression characteristics of family identity);
- Mr. “Faded colors” (expression of a distorted self-image, as if one is no longer visible, becomes invisible – thus unimportant);
- Statue (similar to the porcelain face – lack of life, shame, emotional and vital flattening);
- Cactus (“I am a cactus... sting”) (expression of the idea of rejection, not allowing anyone to approach. I am a person who “stings”, badly and who is not able to approach anyone from this reason).

III. Results

The next step in the qualitative analysis consisted in measuring if there was any correlation between the symbols of the identity roles mentioned in the stories of the participants in the personal development group and the self-esteem level. We thus started from the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant correlation between the identity attributes and the psychological construct mentioned above. To observe the degree of correlation between variables (on one side, the identity attributes and on the other, the self-esteem), we performed a statistical analysis, using the Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients, of nonparametric type, which allow the analysis of ordinary data, by using the SPSS. Each of the stories that contained at least one metaphor was scored with 1, while the stories which did not contain such metaphors were scored with 0. We applied this type of scoring in order to be able to perform the statistical analysis. The results obtained are presented in the table below:

Correlation	Self-esteem
FEMININE ATTRIBUTES	Correlation coef. =.77 Sig (2-tailed) = .00
MASCULINE ATTRIBUTES	Correlation coef.=.68 Sig (2-tailed) = .00
MATERNAL ATTRIBUTES	Correlation coef.=.72 Sig (2-tailed) = .00
PATERNAL ATTRIBUTES	Correlation coef.=.84 Sig (2-tailed) = .00

Thus, as we can see in the table above, at a p (sig 2-tailed) significance of .00 ($p > .001$), there is a positive, statistically significant correlation between the symbols of identity roles present in the metaphors of the therapeutic stories and self-esteem. In conclusion, the hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

IV. Discussion and conclusions

In the study we have performed a content analysis of the archetypal symbols, as well as those materializing self-esteem, contained in the metaphors of the participants’ therapeutic stories. Following the analysis of the 400 stories, we revealed 130 metaphors associated with the four identity archetypes and 19 metaphors associated with self-esteem. The results show us that between the two categories of metaphors there is a positive and statistically significant correlation. However, this type of correlation also allows a psychodiagnostic evaluation mode of projective and experiential type.

We consider that these results are relevant in the context of the content analysis we have performed, but also for the therapeutic intervention in an Experiential Unifying manner, centered on the metaphors revealed in the stories of the participants from the research group. Regarding the values obtained in the present study, we stress that between the paternal type symbols and those of self-esteem there is a very high correlation, the corresponding coefficient being 0.84, while the values of the other coefficients are found at the grid level of high effects. The fact that there is a positive and statistically significant correlation between the symbols of identity roles and self-esteem enables us to carry out the following psychological interpretation: the integration and the assuming of the identity roles by a person will determine a balance of certain psychological constructs, such as self-esteem. Moreover, this conclusion is also reinforced by a similar study (Constantin, 2018), which shows that working with feminine identity symbols leads to a decrease in anxiety. Thus, starting from the premise of a correlation

of the various metaphors with the archetypal symbols, we assumed that the integration of these symbols contributes to the healthy and balanced personal development of an individual, correlates with self-esteem and their integration also determines positive changes on this variable. The hypothesis was confirmed and the stated goal was reached.

In conclusion, with arguments such as the presence of positive values of the correlation coefficients, but also given the diversity of symbols that appear during the creation of a therapeutic story in an Experiential Unifying context, we noticed positive changes in the participants' behavior. These symbols provided the opportunity to creatively and spontaneously explore the participants' negative experiences to re-signify them, but also to find some healthy strategies for their wellbeing.

*
* *

References

- Albert, P. R. (2015). Why is depression more prevalent in women?.
- Constantin, V., Cardaş, F., Petreanu, I. (2014). Creative Improvisation through Literature – Innovation in Unifying Personal Development through Spontaneous Story-writing. Preliminary Study. *Journal of Experiential Psychotherapy, Vol. 17, 4(68)*, p. 47-50.
- Constantin, V. (2015). The Symbolic Experiential Approach of Creative Improvisation through Literature Technique Within a Personal Development Group. *Journal of Experiential Psychotherapy, Vol. 18, 1(69)*, p. 37-43.
- Constantin, V. (2016). Creative Improvisation through literature and its Effects on Anxiety in a Unifying Personal Development Intervention. *Journal of Applied Experimental Psychology – PSIWORLD 2015 Conference Proceedings*, p. 35-38.
- Constantin, V. (2018). The Feminine Identarian Archetype – a Symbolic-Experiential Perspective Revealed within The Creative Improvisation through Literature. *Journal of Experiential Psychotherapy, 4(84)*, p. 29-36.
- Constantin, V., Mitrofan, I. (2015). The Effects of Creative Improvisation through Literature on Self- Esteem in a Unifying Personal Development Group. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, ELSEVIER, PSIWORLD 2014 Conference Proceedings*.
- Constantin, V., Mitrofan, L. (2018). Creative Improvisation through Literature. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, on-line published first, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167818799959>
- Jung, C. G. (1971). *Psychological Types*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Mitrofan, I. (2004). *Terapia Unificării – abordare holistică a dezvoltării și a transformării umane (Unification Therapy – a holistic approach to human development and transformation)*. București: SPER Publishing House.
- Mitrofan, I. (coord.) (2008). *Psihoterapie – repere teoretice, metodologice și aplicative (Psychotherapy – theoretical, methodological and applicative marks)*. București: SPER Publishing House.