

From Logical Thinking to Analogical Thinking

Therapeutic Strategies with Patients in the High Tech Industries

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In the original Star Trek series Captain Kirk was the bold leader, easily moved by the passions of love and anger, and ever present in his manly physicality, while Mr. Spock was emotionally cool and always supremely logical. Spock, the Vulcan, with his computer like mind was always curious if not bewildered by the humans and their enslaving irrational emotions that motivated their behavior above and beyond reason. It made good drama as it not only presented a familiar dynamic in interpersonal relations but also personified two aspects of personality.

In 1985 I watched the Shuttlecraft Challenger go through its systematic countdown, lift off from the launch pad, soar into the skies and explode live on TV. As people all around the world hung their heads and sobbed, we heard a long pause and then a calm dry voice from command central said, "Flight controllers here [are] looking very carefully at the situation. Obviously a major malfunction." With my chest heaving and my tears pouring down I wondered how this man at command central was able to deliver such a calm message at a moment like this. I couldn't imagine how he did it but I felt grateful to him for doing so.

The highly logical mind, adept at abstract thought and reasoning, tends to be somewhat concrete when it comes to psychological mindedness. The logical thinker has the capacity to place emotion at a distance in order to think logically and with precision. The dispassionate mind achieves great things while leaving the passions off to the side. The computer programmer, engineer, accountant, physicist, electronics specialist, mathematician, chemist, and financial officer all have the capacity to put their emotions on hold while performing precision calculations and sophisticated operations involving mathematical computation, logic, scientific reasoning and so on. To leave emotions "on hold" means that one can focus attention and concentrate on, for example, an engineering problem, without emotions and concerns about interpersonal relations impeding logical processes.

But who would we rather see dance, a kiniseologist who understands the physics of body mechanics or someone who lets the spirit of the music stir her soul and carry her like the wind. And who would you prefer to prepare your taxes, a bucking bronco rodeo rider or someone who knows math. Oh sure there are the exceptions of those who are able to think logically and also dance, write poetry and relate warmly but many who are highly logical are so good at setting their emotions to the side at work that they often have difficulty retrieving them in other parts of their life. They often find themselves attracted to flamboyant, artistic, erotic, emotionally warm spouses in whom they make contact with the other side of their own psyches, even if only vicariously.

When highly logical thinking dominates their mental life, familiar problems appear. Emotions may find release in the compulsive use of pornography, in substance abuse, or in attractions to emotionally volatile lovers. Sexuality may become emotionally disconnected or simply go dry. Unstructured time may be dominated by hours of videogames or life may become sterile, isolated and alienated. We are in the diagnostic zones of the obsessive compulsive and the schizoid, and depression, anxiety and psychosomatics are not infrequently a part of the picture. Spouses may describe them as cold, unloving, emotionally distant, not very touchy-feely, robotic or even Spock-like. One couple once came to see me for couple counseling. He was a very organized practical man who was logical and concrete in his thinking and she had a delightful more hysterical style and could easily speak of her emotions and navigate the waters of relatedness. They were having trouble understanding each other's points of view. I tried one way after another to help them see and understand and appreciate their differences when suddenly I noticed that he had a shirt with a cross-hatched pattern while she had blouse with a colorful flowery pattern. It seemed to say it all and when I pointed it out to them they began to better recognize one another and their different approaches to the world. It was, of course, those different approaches that originally attracted them to each other and later led to their most difficult problems.

We find these highly logical thinkers in any population but the Pacific Northwest is home to Microsoft, Google, Boeing, Amazon, Expedia, and dozens of other high tech and engineering companies so we see these sorts of patients far more frequently in our practices. So what do we do when one of these patients comes to us for psychotherapy?

I suppose the first thing to say is that many of these patients do not bring themselves to therapy at all. It's simply not logical for them to do so. But for those that do arrive at our office doors, there are often three motivating forces: a distressed spouse who insists the highly logical thinker see a therapist, their own psychic pain that overrides any effort to try to deal with it through other channels and finally their curiosity. Ultimately I find curiosity is my best ally. If the patient isn't curious to begin with, I find that I often start talking with them in a folksy and didactic manner to begin to get them curious about their disconnected emotional life. They are often very intelligent people who have spent years in school and like learning and figuring things out. So even though I start with intellectualization, I do so in order to build a door in what would otherwise be a solid concrete wall of resistance. I think that to invite a patient like this to simply free-associate without any induction into psychoanalytic thinking would leave them high and dry, puzzled and, before you know it, out the door.

I say to them, "You know, when you go to work you use logic to understand cause and effect relation, and you do it well. When I go to work I also think logically but I also think analogically. Analogies do not describe causal relations but they often illuminate emotional relations. Your conflict with your boss is thousands of miles and decades away

from your childhood, but the dynamics are parallel to those you had in your relationship to your father. Your wife and mother don't get along. Your mother was a homemaker and your wife is a professional. But in your parents' marriage your mother set the agenda and organized the family while your father followed along and you and your wife do something similar."

Remember the TV show *Dragnet*? Sergeant Joe Friday, the detective, would interview an upset woman crying, and going on and on telling her story of trauma and distress. Sergeant Friday would stand stone-faced and then interrupt her to say, "All we want are the facts." While the facts may be all that are necessary for a police investigation or for an engineering problem, human relations often require emotional elaboration for deeper understanding of subjective experiences of love, hurt, jealousy, desire, competition, longing. But Sergeant Joe Fridays often don't have much of a vocabulary for emotional states. They might be entirely unaware of their feeling states. And when they are aware of them, a single word like "mad" might be employed to describe feeling hurt, angry, frustrated, irritated, jealous, envious, upset, lost, helpless, etc. A first step for a Joe Friday in therapy might be to identify feeling states. These patients often don't know why they are feeling what they are feeling and so a second step would be to link those feeling states to the preceding events. To do so, it is often useful to share with the patient what a typical feeling state might be when, for example, some one at work gets the recognition that the patient wanted or when a girlfriend leaves a relationship. When feeling states are linked with the preceding events, a psychological space opens up and is recognized as an "experience".

These patients often need help to see that events and experiences are not the same thing. Events are the unknowable reality of things happening in time and space. Experiences are what each of us make of those events, how we perceive them, our point of view, our interpretation of them. If methodically naming feeling states, identifying preceding events and "constructing" experiences sounds a bit mechanical – it is. But we're trying to introduce a bit of flexibility in a rigid system so we should not be surprised if the first level of flexibility is as stiff as the Tin Man. As the patient gets to feel more comfortable enduring emotions, we hope greater flexibility will be incorporated to endure humor and stronger feelings and even appreciate the different feelings and experiences of others.

Many whose minds are highly logical tend to leave their emotions off to the side and consequently have trouble navigating relationships and understanding social cues. The rules of social relations, that others may internalize without thinking, are sometimes seen by these patients as foreign, arbitrary or ridiculous. This creates a form of eccentricity reminiscent of the lead character on the old TV show *My Favorite Martian* – a highly intelligent and again logical man who does not understand the rules of social relations and so perceives them more phenomenologically.

You don't have to have a highly logical mind to be odd or unique or eccentric and some highly logical thinkers read social cues very well and are in fact conventional enough to be described as fairly normal. But it's not uncommon that the highly logical thinker marches to the beat of a different drum and actually has trouble marching in step with others. Finding a spouse who can draw the logical thinker into the world of love, emotion and relatedness is often very important for the logical thinker, as it provides a kind of antidote for many of the typical difficulties that go along with logical thinkers. The logical thinker sometimes has trouble enduring the flow and the flux of emotion and relatedness but is capable of creating a solid structure, financial security and a well organized home base for the relationship.

For those that leave their emotions off to the side, psychotherapy is about building a bridge between their conscious mind and their less accessible emotional life. That bridge is analogical thought. In gaining access to analogical thought we are suddenly in a position to understand the nature of different relationships that have parallel dynamics; understand that favorite hobbies, books and films have pieces of our autobiography embedded in them; understand that our symptoms are compromise formations of our own conflicts; understand the metaphorical relation of sexual fantasies and psychic structure; understand that the compulsive use of pornography, videogames, alcohol, gambling, and so on are not simply recreational activities that one pursues out of pleasure but also serve a function in escaping from other less pleasant experiences. For those without much access to their creative unconscious, psychotherapy becomes a safe place to cross the bridge and encounter oneself in dreams, fantasies, symptoms, slips of the tongue and so on.

When we can make a logical case for exploring the analogical and develop the capacity to think metaphorically, we set the stage for finding meaning in dreams, fantasies, humor and parapraxes. Being inherently logical thinkers these patients approach their dreams (and their emotional lives) with a certain disregard. We need to logically and didactically explain to them that dreams are not memories. They are not plans and they are not to be taken literally. They are unconscious constructions that only make sense when viewed as constellations of metaphors to which we invite the patient to free-associate in a playful manner to arrive at tentative meanings that will be confirmed or not by the emotional fit that the patient experiences in relation to the interpretations generated.

The highly logical thinker is sometimes cut off or more distant from the emotions. There is a logical, practical, concrete orientation to the world, to self and to therapy. "I have a problem. You are a professional fixer of these problems. Fix me." But what model of self are they operating under? Is this person a machine that is broken and in need of being fixed? A watch in need of repair? A radio in need of tuning? A car in need of an overhaul? A learning machine in need of relearning. People often think of themselves as objects in need of repair. But the psyche is not an object. It is dynamic, in flux,

multimodal, polyvocal, interactional and a field phenomenon. There is no ego, only egoing; no self, only selving; no soul, only souling.

I once saw a news report in which people were asked about their use of smartphones. One man enthusiastically endorsed them saying he likes to be with his smartphone at all times and in all places and concluded his comments by saying, “Some of us are just programmed that way”. While such metaphors may be useful, they have their limits and their psychotherapeutic limitations. Psychotherapy is not reprogramming. It is a human relationship in which one person helps the other to say things that are difficult to say and in doing so helps that person to keep as few secrets as possible and thereby live more comfortably in his/her own skin.

My main point is that technically we often need to begin the therapeutic work with the highly logical thinker with didactic (cognitive) methods that help to induct the patient into an analytic dialogue with the goal of establishing connections between the patient’s thoughts and feelings, between adult life and early childhood experience, between dreams and waking life and between problems in the world and the problems that emerge in the transference. And the word that unites all of them is metaphor. The highly logical thinker is typically very intelligent and often quite curious so when the metaphorical nature of human experience can be logically presented, it can sometimes unlock the door to the unconscious motivations that have created the symptoms for which the patient is consulting us.

Some patients will ask, “Why should my problems have anything to do with my childhood? That was a long time ago and far away.” It was one of Freud’s most powerful insights, that early childhood experience shapes adult psychic structure. And while Oprah Winfrey, among others, popularized this insight and built a career on it, it is still news to many people and resisted fiercely. To this resistance I sometimes say that even the top floor of a skyscraper is dependent upon its foundation. Other times I tell my own version of the Princess and the Pea. Her symptom was that she could not sleep because there was a single pea under her mattress. She defended against it by placing one mattress on top of another until her bed had become a tower of mattresses. Finally she had to take them all off and get down to the bottom and once and for all deal with the pea – the conflict that would not let her sleep.

Some avoid their conflicts in manic activity: overwork, videogames, gambling, obsessive activities, fast driving, extreme behavior, high-risk behavior and so on. They are driving fast to get away from the guy in the back seat. To pull over, stop the car and talk to the guy in the back seat is to feel uncomfortable but its also to begin to deal with the hurt, the loss, the disappointment, the loneliness, the sadness, the upsetting memories, the painful messages that can’t be shaken, the self critiques, and so on.

Many of these highly logical thinkers are men and their wives are the ones more in touch with the emotional life and relationships. But it is certainly not always that way. We have all seen couples in which the dynamics were reversed and others in which both husband and wife were highly logical thinkers giving rise to other sorts of dynamics.

Consequences of the highly logical mind might include emotional unavailability, a desiccation of the sexual life; the eruption of impulses in excessive pornography, alcoholism, gambling and other compulsive behaviors; a focus on doing things to the exclusion of being with others. Erik Erikson wrote of a little boy who had learned in his family that he “had to be especially good in order not to be especially bad” (Erikson, 1950,1963, p. 36). This is a good description of the low self-esteem hidden beneath the manic, high achieving, perfectionist personality. “I am good for what I do but I don’t feel loved, accepted, adored. My manias, distractions and incessant activity soothe my atrophied awareness of my ancient sorrow.”

When we invite the hyper-logical thinker into therapy we invite him/her to talk about what is difficult to talk about and in doing so learn to keep as few secrets from him/her self as possible. Their secrets reside beneath intellectualization, abstraction, rationalization and a raft of somewhat common symptoms. Inducting these patients into therapy and into an analytic dialogue often begins with a more didactic and frankly cognitive strategy to engage their curiosity, help them locate their feelings, learn to think analogically and recognize the metaphors and meanings embedded in their daily lives.

Bibliography:

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