

## A SOLUTION-BUILDING METAPHORICAL CONCEPT FOR DIRECT SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*As a practicing social worker the researcher was interested in a specific metaphorical concept that was used in a private practice context during direct social work intervention with children. The metaphorical concept was subjected to methodological analysis to determine and describe its applicability with the aim of adding to the body of knowledge regarding the use of metaphors in direct work with children from a solution-focused perspective. The underlying metatheory was social constructionism with specific reference to solution-focused and strengths-based social work practice.*

*It was found that the particular metaphorical concept had specific functions that could be linked to solution-building questions and play actions. Adaptations to the basic metaphor were observed when it was used as part of sensory play, biblioplay and to enhance posttraumatic play.*

### INTRODUCTION

When challenged by difficult life situations, children often develop inner worlds where repetitive thoughts, worry and confusion prevail. Faced with events such as divorce, bereavement or exposure to sexual trauma, they may be trapped in states of 'frozen awareness' (Redgrave, 2000:5) where misconceptions and irrational fears reign. Therapeutic expression of these concerns can be facilitated in many ways, using various play actions and verbal discussion.

Metaphorical concepts are intervention tools that surpass verbal level communication and facilitate the process of entering the worlds of children. It was tentatively deduced that the use of metaphorical concepts with children stands in the service of solution-focused intervention that according to Lee (2003:387) accentuate pragmatic use of client strengths, working from the client's personal construction of reality and holding the client accountable for solution-seeking that is embedded in the context of human interaction.

The metaphorical concept of a pit or deep hole was used frequently in private practice by the researcher in her role as social worker, and it was notable that it helped children to externalise their problems, to verbalise their situations more clearly and to move more easily to workable solutions. An empirical study was conducted to explore these tentative observations in a structured way. The main areas of analysis were the functions of the specific metaphorical concept as well as adaptations to the basic metaphor. It became clear through the study that this specific metaphorical concept can be utilised to concretise typical solution-building questions, also by adding play actions. Blundo (2001) discusses the challenges to social workers to shift paradigms from traditional practice models to strengths-based practice and mentions that it is easy to use strengths semantics without making it real in practice. This article is an effort to show the pragmatic use of a specific tool within strengths-based and solution-building intervention.

## CURRENT STUDY

### Subjects

A search through files identified a total of 67 cases where the technique was used during 2000–2004 with children in the age group 6–13 years. These children either experienced acute trauma such as motor vehicle crashes, sexual trauma or parental homicide or were exposed to family disruption, marital problems or parental divorce. No sampling was done, as it was possible to work with the whole population on account of the limited focus on one specific metaphorical concept.

### Measures

The research methodology for the current empirical study was mainly content analysis that entails analysing the content of texts or documents (Mouton, 2001:165), with content referring to: "... words, meanings, pictures, symbols, themes or any other message that can be communicated." The study can be linked to evaluation research as described by Mouton (2001:161) as the use of qualitative research methods to evaluate implementation of programmes. The researcher was the social worker that worked with the children in all the cases thereby linking the study to practitioner-research. Furthermore, the study was application driven with elements of theory building aimed at analysing, refining and expanding the specific metaphorical concept within a solution-building paradigm.

### Research design and procedures

In general, the study was exploratory and can be linked with Grinnell and William's (1990:151) observation of exploratory studies generating tentative insights and explanations which can be studied more rigorously at other levels of research.

The main data collection tool was scrutinising existing non-computerised documentary sources, namely case files including process reports and client drawings, reflecting retrospectively on direct social work with children in a private practice context. The analysis of file content was targeted at a specific metaphorical concept, namely a pit. The effects of the intervention on clients' progress were not examined, but their immediate reactions to the specific metaphorical concept were noted, within the parameters of **specific functions, solution-building questions or actions and adaptations** to the basic metaphor, taking special note of emerging themes or links with specific forms of play.

A literature review was conducted with special reference to the use of metaphor, direct practice with children and solution-focused intervention. Theoretical and empirical articles were used. A list of possible functions of the metaphorical concept was compiled from the literature study as well as tentative observations by the researcher in her role as social worker. While analysing file content, the list of functions was expanded.

The content analysis was qualitative rather than quantitative with the aim to describe the different applications and not to compare them. A strong point of content analysis is that errors in data collection linked to respondents such as placebo effects and non-response are usually absent. A possible limitation is interpretive bias, with the researcher looking retrospectively at file content of which she was the author in her role as social worker. This is mitigated in part by the focus on description rather than comparison, with the aim to analyse the specific metaphorical concept within specific functions, application to solution-building and to expand and enrich the basic metaphor by looking at other applications.

The study was retrospective, implying that research was not planned at the time of intervention. While using the metaphor, the researcher as social worker became interested in the functions thereof and also observed that there was a specific fit with solution-focused intervention.

## SOLUTION-FOCUSED PLAY INTERVENTION

Lee (2003:387) argues that solution-focused intervention has an a-theoretical basis and focuses pragmatically on what is effective in intervention. A core principle in solution-focused intervention is to divert the focus from the person to the problem. Solution-focused intervention shows consistency with a strengths perspective, where according to Saleebey (2002:1) the focus should shift creatively and ingenuously from problem to possibility. Within the context of direct social work with children approaches vary from directive to non-directive. The use of the pit as metaphorical concept can be rooted in a focused, directive play intervention model where solutions and strengths are emphasised. Solution-focused play intervention, of which the pit metaphor is a specific tool, can be grounded in a social-constructionist perspective where social processes and interaction result in new or changed knowledge and ideas of reality (Lee, 2003:36). The intervention process is geared at opening new ideas of the reality, either through verbal language or the language of play.

Van der Merwe (1991, 1999) describes five forms of play, based on the work of Dennison and Glassman (1987) and Porter (1983). These forms of play can be utilised in a focused play approach, namely relaxation play, assessment play, biblioplay, dramatic play and creative play. These fluid categories encompass a range of techniques that aid the process of entering the child's world, impacting on possible misconceptions and allowing expression of affect. Underlying this focused play approach is an integrative approach of play therapy where the intervention plan is based on the personal characteristics, play preferences, strengths and specific problem and needs of each child. This person-directed, goal-directed framework with the different play forms can accommodate the use of therapeutic metaphors in all the play categories. Metaphorical concepts can aid relaxation play, can be used to reduce the therapeutic intensity of sessions, it has assessment value, can be used creatively with art and drama and also as part of story telling. Specific play actions can be connected to solution-building questions as will be demonstrated later.

Brems (2002:252) outlines the functions of play in child intervention, namely to establish a trusting relationship, to aid disclosure, by allowing amongst others for expression of forbidden affects and needs and also to facilitate assessment and lastly the healing function where coping skills are taught, tension released, defenses dealt with and corrective emotional experiences provided. It is within these parameters where the pit as metaphorical concept is utilised as a tool to facilitate solution-focused conversation and play.

## METAPHOR IN INTERVENTION

The utilisation of metaphor in therapeutic intervention is not new. The 1980's was a specifically prolific time for writers on this subject (Cox & Theilgaard, 1986). As far back as 1986 Mills and Crowley (1986:65) outlined elements of therapeutic metaphors in a now historical document, *Therapeutic metaphors for children and the child within*. They suggested that children must have a sense of identification with the metaphor and a sense of shared experience must follow to replace the sense of isolation. The problem should be symbolised accurately enough to break the impression of alienation, but indirectly enough so that a child does not feel ashamed or resistant. In another historic source, Gorelick (1989:149) discussed metaphor as a change agent for the creative art therapies.

Metaphor, with the Greek meaning 'to carry across' (Gorelick, 1989:151) has been used as synonym for symbol, figure of speech, allegory and image. In language theory a distinction is made between a metaphor and a comparison. The dictionary definition of metaphor implies the use of words to indicate something different from the literal meaning as in "She has a heart of stone." The dictionary definition of comparison is simply "When compared with i.e. the comparison of a heart to a pump" (Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2003:564, 182) According to Gorelick (1989:151) metaphors "... present one thing in the semblance of another." The Webster Comprehensive Dictionary (1995:800) defines metaphor as "... a figure of speech in which one object is likened to another by speaking of it as if it were that other." Mills and Crowley (1986:7-14) describe a metaphor as a form of symbolic language, used as teaching method in many fields. They refer to Jung's use of symbol, which also represents "...something beyond their immediate appearance..." that offers a way of expressing and transforming life. Placing metaphor in the context of changes and transition, Gorelick (1989:151) alludes to therapeutic metaphors as vehicles that carry people across transitions right from the first teddy bear to the rites of passage.

Meichenbaum (1994:110) refers to the workable distinction of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in cognitive conceptual metaphor theory between:

- *structural metaphors* (one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another i.e., intimate relationships are likened to wars);
- *orientation metaphors* (where a set of concepts is organised in spatial relationship to another i.e., feeling as if one is in a bottomless pit); and
- *physical metaphors* (where understanding of experience is in terms of physical substances and objects i.e., feels like a jackhammer).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5) emphasise that "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." They argue that thought processes are fundamentally metaphorical, embedded in the human conceptual system, and therefore more than mere language. What is often referred to as metaphor would therefore be more aptly described as metaphorical concept. Metaphors can be delineated in negative or positive terms. Negatively toned would be '*I am sliding down*' versus a positively toned metaphor such as '*I am climbing out of the pit*'.

Meichenbaum (1994:109) describes how clients use '*like*' or '*as-if*' statements to give language to and conceptualise their terrible experiences by stating: "In short, our clients become '*poets*', who use the language and the tools of literature (metaphors, similes, analogies, and the like) to describe their experiences and reactions". It is important to take note of Meichenbaum's observation that metaphors are not mere figures of speech, but have intra- and interpersonal consequences which also act as windows to observe how people interpret their worlds.

## THE PIT AS METAPHORICAL CONCEPT

In clinical practice of the author, people have referred to their situations as '*being in a pit*' hitting '*rock-bottom*' or '*slipping*'. Also in the foreword to Mills and Crowley (1986), Rossi (1986:xiii) refers to metaphor as being effective in "... its rapid resolution of the client's sense of being mired in a hopeless muddle." Meichenbaum (1994) cites the following client metaphors where reference is made to a pit or abyss:

*Hole in myself, not complete, a loser. Life is a shambles. A bottomless pit.*

*I fell through the safety net.*

*I feel like I'm in a cave and can't get out.*

*In a pit climbing to get out and there are no footholds to help me get out*

When experiencing themselves as being inside the pit people typically feel detached as if they live in a glass bubble. Meichenbaum (1994:113) mentions a client metaphor of a person saying that he is in "... a meaning vacuum, a void with sounds of emptiness." Healing metaphors may refer to a move forward, out of the darkness, and out of the pit. People would typically say "I am starting to see the light."

Furthermore, the pit is a well-known concept from a religious perspective. Direct reference to the pit is made in the Bible, Ps. 40:2: "He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out from the bog and the mire, and set my feet on a hard, firm path and steadied me as I walked along" and Ps. 69:15: "Don't let the floods overwhelm me, or the ocean swallow me; save me from the pit that threatens me."

The concept of the pit can partially be categorised as an orientation metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:14-16) allude to orientation metaphors as a physical basis for personal well-being, i.e. "Things are looking up", versus "Things are at an all-time low." Viewing happy as "up" and unhappy as "low", the pit metaphor places these feelings in a specific context, namely a pit. The visual portrayal of the pit allows for externalisation and creative input aimed at solution construction. Using an orientation metaphor, Redgrave (2000:5-8) discusses the concept of "stuck" children, which may refer to unfinished situations, incomplete Gestalten, developmental impediments, frozen awareness or emotional fixation, all of which might keep the child in the pit of despair. Clearly, the concept of a pit to describe difficulties is a well-known concept in ordinary speech, from a religious perspective and also in the field of therapeutic intervention.

## FUNCTION OF THE PIT AS METAPHOR

Once more linking the use of metaphor with solution-focused intervention, Lee (2003:390) can be cited who describes the purpose of solution-focused intervention as engaging the client in a "... therapeutic conversation that is conducive to a solution-building process." The pit as metaphorical concept is a practical way of doing just that. It helps child clients to reflect on and play about what they want differently in their lives (envision life outside the pit of despair), what strengths and resources they have and to formulate practical solutions to make the necessary changes.

Some functions of the pit as metaphorical concept in direct work with children were tentatively observed when the researcher applied the metaphor in her role as social worker. General functions of metaphors in intervention were also described in literature:

- It is an *assessment* tool when measuring the child's different placements in the pit. The pit metaphor allows *movement* from being stuck in the pit to seeing opportunities for growth and change. People often follow destructive patterns and metaphorically constantly fall into the same holes. The pit metaphor can be applied to concretise these pitfalls in their lives and to help them construct a different road where they avoid such pitfalls.
- Metaphorical concepts help children to *externalise* their problems. Wagner (2003:377) refers to externalisation as a "... linguistic technique... to separate children from their problems". It provides distance and parallel stories for children to use while working with their problems.

Gorelick (1989:152) alludes to the reframing and interpretation of experiences that are facilitated by the use of metaphor.

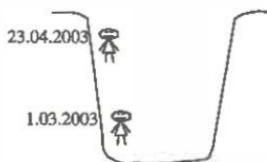
- It facilitates meaningful *communication* with children and helps them to verbalise their situations more clearly. Children commonly use metaphor and symbolism as communication vehicles (Brems, 2002:224-225) and thereby clarify their understanding of their social realities. When children introduce metaphors during the helping process, such metaphors are often "... objects which are symbolic for himself." (Redgrave, 2000:54). Metaphor offers a language that can be used for the reinterpretation of the sometimes-evasive problem or reaction to the problem. It also aids the expression of affect. According to Gorelick (1989:152) the use of metaphors bypass defenses and facilitate therapeutic relationships.
- It advances the joint search for workable *solutions* by identifying *social support, assets and resources* that have been described as protective factors for those struggling with difficult issues and changes. Using the pit as metaphor can help to identify preservative and life affirming traits and capacities that help children in adversity as mentioned by Saleebey (2002:14).

When analysing file content for this study, it was especially pertinent to find practical examples where children used the pit as metaphorical concept within these functions.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE PIT AS METAPHORICAL CONCEPT

Working with the pit metaphor is a collaborative process between client and social worker where solutions are discussed and ways offered to the child to express feelings. It is used right through the helping process either by referring back to previously used pit diagrams or drawing new ones. Hobday and Ollier (1998:49-50) describe the practical application of the pit as metaphor, suggesting that it be used for the age group 11 years and upward. In clinical practice the author has utilised the metaphor with children from 6 years and older. As soon as they have achieved some level of abstract thinking and also the ability for self-representation through matchstick figures or dolls, they should be able to grasp this concept. Hobday and Ollier (1998:49) suggest that the child or social worker draw a simple line with a U-shape to represent the pit. The child indicates a position inside or outside the pit, with "...the bottom of the pit is feeling as dreadful as anyone can and the top of the pit is feeling fine". Every time a child places self or a family member in the pit, the name and date is added so that a record of progress is available. (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1  
EXAMPLE OF PIT PLACEMENT



While working jointly with the drawing of the pit, solution-building activities and questioning are incorporated. An approach of "not knowing" is followed by the social worker where according to

Blundo (2001:303) a shared and two-way discourse develops. The following solution-building questions or play actions integrate the pit as metaphor and is built on the work of experts in the field of solution-focused and strengths-based intervention (Berg & De Jong, 1996:377-386; De Jong & Berg, 2002; Lee, 2003:390; Saleebey, 2002:89). Taking child development into account it will often be more appropriate to ask child clients to show rather than to tell.

<b>Scaling questions / play actions</b> (Helpful to determine placement in the pit)	On a scale of 1–10 with 1 the worst that can happen and 10 the best, how would you rate your current situation? Suppose we had a scale of 0 – 10 with 0 being the pits and 10 being “there is no problem” where would you place yourself (Milner & O’Byrne, 2002:140).
<b>Survival/coping questions/play actions</b>	Show me where you are in the pit? (Drawing or use play figures) How did you survive/coped thus far? How are you surviving in that specific position in the pit? What makes it better while you are there in the pit? Place stickers of facial expressions or draw a face showing your feelings.
<b>Support/relationship questions/play actions</b> (Helpful to explore clients perceptions of their social contexts)	On who can you depend? Who will throw ropes into the pit to pull you from the pit? Is there anyone who will shoot advice, without actually trying to pull you out? Would you like to draw stick figures of the helpers with their ropes? Who will be first in line? Who will be absent? Show me where your family members are in or outside the pit.
<b>Exception questions / play actions</b> (Recall times when the problems were absent or less intense)	What sparkling moments were there in your life when things worked well? Can you tap into that experience and take something out of it that can help you now? Can these experiences be helpful as imaginary stones that you can stack to gradually climb out of the pit?
<b>Possibility/outcome questions / play actions</b>	What do you hope for, is it feasible and how will you get there? The miracle or dream question can be posed to clarify client goals by incorporating the pit metaphor i.e. suppose while you are sleeping tonight a miracle happens to put you on the outside of the pit, what difference will you notice when you wake up in the morning? What will be different in your life?
<b>Esteem questions / play actions</b>	When people say good things about you, what do they say? What gives you pleasure? Can you place any of these things in the pit as steps (solutions) to climb out? Pretend you have a shield or weapons to help you, what will these be?

To aid solution-building a basic problem-solving process is usually discussed. The ICANDO acronym is a helpful 6-step problem-solving sequence (Dubow, Schmidt, McBride, Edwards & Merk, 1993:430-431) implying: Identification of the problem, Choices, Attention to detail of each choice, Narrowing choices down to one or more, Doing it and assessing Outcomes. The metaphorical concept of the pit can be used as a tool to identify strengths according to the ROPES model of Graybeal (2001:237) where the focus is on identifying resources, options, possibilities, exceptions and solutions.

## RESULTS

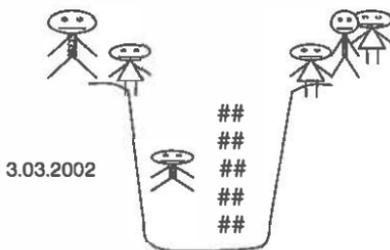
The first area of interest was the analysis of file content according to the functions of the pit as metaphorical concept. Some functions are combined in the discussion to form three broad function categories, namely (i) metaphor as assessment tool; (ii) metaphor to facilitate externalisation, communication and avenues for expression of feelings and (iii) metaphor to identify support, assets and resources as part of the endeavor to promote growth and finding workable solutions.

The second area of interest was to link the analysis with **solution-building questions and play actions**, and a concise indication of a possible fit with these questions and play actions is noted after each example.

### **Metaphor as assessment tool**

- Child clients placed family members (represented by matchstick drawings, small toy persons, clay figures or stickers) in the pit, offering opportunity for discussion about the reasons for the placement. These placements were dated to offer a chart of progress. [*Scaling question/play action*]
- A child of 9 caught up in a conflictual relationship between his parents, drew himself falling head first into the abyss of the pit. This gave a good indication of his feelings of despair as was confirmed with verbal discussion. [*Coping question/play action*]
- Three children (aged 7, 6 and 9) expressed the view that they are stuck in the pit and drew lids on top of the figures representing themselves in the pit. The reasons for their perception of being stuck could be explored, adding to the richness of assessment. [*Scaling question/play action*]
- Children listed reasons for a specific placement next to the pit, i.e., divorce, dad left with someone else, parents are lying, having to share mother with new boyfriend. This clarified their situations and aided assessment. [*Scaling question/play action*]
- A boy of 13 had to cope with the divorce of his parents, drug abuse of his mother and her involvement in abusive relationships. When he reported upward positive movement in his pit, he attributed it to improvement in his school performance, the fact that he laughed more, the opportunity to talk about his feelings in intervention and him being more helpful at home. When assessing these reasons it was clear that he looked at himself to improve his situation and did not see the solutions as being external, i.e. his mother has to change. [*Exception question/play action*]
- A child in a difficult life situation where decisions had to be made about his future care placed himself down in the pit with extended family on the one side and his mother and stepfather on the other side. (See Figure 2). He drew a wall between him and the extended family. His verbal discussions supported the drawing, namely that the extended family was not perceived as helpful. His drawings in the pit showed a progression and he explained his reasoning as he drew. Working on the drawing seemed to make it easier for him to show, discuss and project important aspects of his life. This assessment was supported with other techniques. [*Scaling question/play action*]

**FIGURE 2**  
**CHILD'S DEPICTION OF PIT PLACEMENT OF SELF AND FAMILY**



The pit as metaphorical concept had value as assessment tool. It bridged mere verbal discussion and helped children to express areas of need and possible solutions.

**Externalisation of the problem, enhancing meaningful communication, offering new language and avenues for expression of feelings**

In this second function category the following examples can be cited:

- A child (10) verbalised his feelings of despair and helplessness during a difficult divorce. He placed himself half-way down in the pit and made statements such as *"I wish we had two fridges; I am sick and tired of this divorce story."* He answered a solution-building question on options to move out of the pit by saying: *"I want to hide in my computer. I will become part of a computer game and will be the strongest one there."* The computer character became a functional tool in discussions of his situation. It offered a language for externalisation that appealed to the child and that offered adequate distance from his situation. [*Scaling and possibility or outcome questions/play actions*]
- A child (8) whose mother had AIDS placed himself on one side outside of the pit and his mother on the other side. He drew a big object between them and later verbalised that it was the illness. He denied being adversely affected by the illness, but during a discussion made additional drawings of him and his mother right down in the pit. This play action provided opportunity to talk about his difficult life situation and fears about his future care. Solution-building play actions helped him to express his true feelings. [*Scaling and support or relationship questions/play actions*]
- While working with a pit drawing, a boy (9 years old) whose father committed suicide said that he sometimes want to remember the good memories, but *'... then they just pop away'*. He referred to his inability to recall good memories as one factor that keeps him in the pit. He referred to a *'triple decker good memory that wanted to kill the unhappy memory'*. In this case the pit as metaphorical concept lead to in-depth discussion of difficult feelings and facilitated the development of workable language. [*Survival/coping questions/play actions*]
- A child (8 years old) placed himself outside the pit, his mother at the bottom and his father halfway down. He used a play figure of an alien and said that he is an alien boy who suddenly realised that people on earth divorce. Also in this case new language and concepts developed

from the basic pit metaphor. [*Survival/coping and possibility or outcome questions/play actions*]

- A boy of 7, who never knew his biological father, drew a broken bridge over the pit, with himself falling through. He drew water in the pit with a safety buoy. One of his three wishes was to 'have a dad forever'. [*Scaling and possibility or outcome questions/play action*]
- Children often listed feelings next to the pit, using words, colour, drawings or stickers. The pit metaphor can be combined with other techniques such as indicating feelings on a body map. The pit metaphor was also combined with elements of a "feelings thermometer" (Redgrave, 2000:31) or "emotion barometer" (Thompson & Elliot, 1987:312-317; Van der Merwe, 1991:186; Van der Merwe, 1999:310). A girl (10) used colours to make a mixture of various feelings down in the pit. [*Scaling question/play action*]

The pit as metaphorical concept helped to clarify the life situations of the participants and aided the expression of feelings, which was an important first step in solution building.

### **Finding workable solutions, identifying social support, assets and resources and focusing on growth**

The third function category moved the metaphor away from mere scaling questions and orientation. It facilitated an active search for workable solutions by looking at support, assets, strengths and resources.

- Information was gained about perceived support by asking children to draw on the outside of the pit, those people who will be throwing ropes into the pit to pull them out. Some children said that no one would help them, whereas others could identify many perceived formal and informal support structures. This was often followed with the compellation of ecomaps (Hartman, 1978:468-472; Van der Merwe, 1991:160-161). A girl of 8 in a divorce situation placed an angel outside the pit. She also wrote God, Holy Spirit and Jesus on top of the pit to reflect how she found an anchor in religion. By asking about sparkling moments in their lives, strengths and perceived positive past coping were explored. [*Esteem; survival or coping and support or relationship questions/play actions*]
- The concept of a trampoline in the pit was used as a springboard for finding own solutions, growth and self-help. It helped to assess constructive or non-constructive efforts at self-sufficiency. [*Esteem and survival or coping questions/play actions*]
- Bridges were used in conjunction with the pit metaphor as mechanisms for prevention or solution seeking. Redgrave (2000:65-68) outlines the symbolism of bridges in intervention with children by citing a case study of a child constructing a bridge over the wilderness of his life, which can also be compared with a pit of despair. Redgrave (2000) further outlines a bridge as something the child wants to cross or complete and during the process of bridge building can ponder or reflect on possible solutions, which may reinforce positive coping. Redgrave (2000) suggests that bridges can be constructed of small bricks or self-hardening clay. Combining it with the pit metaphor can be helpful, especially as it incorporates another play medium, which can help with expression and to keep the child client's attention. [*Survival or coping and support or relationship questions/play actions*]
- The concept of packing stones, or inventing steps by drawing them into the pit was often incorporated. This is helpful when linked with a problem-solving process, when possible solutions are written on the stones. Prompted by the social worker, children also used concepts

such as shields to indicate the skills they would need for solution-focused work. [*Survival or coping and exception questions/play actions*]

- A girl of 9 with peer relationship problems placed a lid on top of the pit to prevent herself from falling in. She had a strong supportive family and many protective variables in her life space. She could actively partake in the process of finding solutions to her problems with peers. [*Survival or coping and support or relationship questions/play actions*]

It emerged from the content analysis of files that *scaling* and also *coping* questions and play actions were often used for assessment. *Scaling* questions were effective to externalise problems and facilitate communication. For this last function *survival* and *coping* questions as well as *possibility* and *outcome* questions were also used. When looking for solutions and as part of that identifying social support and resources, it was clear that *support* and *relationship* questions and play actions were helpful. *Survival* and *coping* questions were also used. To enhance solution building it was however clear that *exception* questions could be used more, especially miracle questions and dream questions. *Esteem* questions or play actions can also be used more often as part of this specific metaphor. It can add value to the technique if specific questions and play actions are directed towards the child's special abilities; knowledge and strengths incorporated as stepping-stones to wellness. As an orientation metaphor, the metaphorical concept of the pit at first glance seems to be fitted to scaling questions. It was clear from file content however that there is much more richness to the metaphor than mere orientation.

### Adaptations to the basic metaphor

The third area of interest for this study was adaptations to the basic metaphor. It was observed in the clinical practice of the author that children adapted the technique and the researcher was especially interested in how the adaptations enriched the application of the metaphor in ways, which could be generalised to other children. Adaptations can be linked to sensory work, biblioplay and posttraumatic play.

### Sensory work

- Incorporating sensory experience, some children used clay to make a pit. The child and family were represented with clay figures or small toys.
- Plastic or clay plant holders were used to represent the pit. Other substances such as water, mud and sand were used in these containers to represent feelings or the elements contributing to 'stuckness'.
- A boy of 11 with an absent father melted crayons to make a pit and then used drops of candle's wax to represent him and family members in the pit. This sensory technique is helpful to overcome resistance and defenses.

Sensory work links with the observation of Redgrave (2000:54) "When children are engaged in an activity, be it walking or painting, or even making mud pies, conversation comes more easily. The sit-behind-the-desk, eye-ball to eye-ball question and answer technique often produces only 'yes', 'no', or perhaps whatever the child feels you want to hear." In combination with the pit metaphor, sensory work engages more senses as it incorporates touch and texture and also colour sensations bringing about what Redgrave (2000:35) describes as a release of conversation while engaged in an absorbing activity.

## Biblioplay

Biblioplay conveys information, and offers parallel stories where the process of solution-building is demonstrated. Brems (2002:273) points out that children use stories to reveal information about themselves, to express affect and needs and also to engage in problem-solving.

- Both the Bible and Koran refer to the life history of Joseph or Yusuf, who was thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers. The author used this as a parallel story as Joseph/Yusuf encountered many trials and tribulations before eventually moving from victim to survivor to thriver. Joseph's history was analysed to find possible solutions.
- The pit metaphor was combined with bibliotherapy when the following story was told: *"Once upon a time a donkey fell into a deep pit. The farmer saw it happen and tried to think of a plan to help the donkey out. When he could not think of a plan, he phoned all the neighbors and asked them to bring their trucks with sand so that they could fill up the pit and help the donkey to die a speedy death. As the farmers tipped their loads of sand into the pit they noticed a strange thing. With every load of sand, the donkey would use his hooves to scratch the sand together. He would then stand on top of the heap of sand and repeat the process when the next load came. Eventually he could climb out of the pit."* Children often interrupted the story to tell their own version or to engage in play actions regarding their own journeys out of the pit.

The combination of the metaphorical concept of the pit with biblioplay facilitated solution-building when parallel stories provided a richness of new solutions and coping styles, linking it to Brems' observation (2002:283) that stories lead to inventive ways of communication with children by using symbolism and metaphor.

## Enhancing posttraumatic play

After exposure to trauma, children often project their traumatic memories into play where it emerges as posttraumatic play. Play reenactment is repetitive, serious, monotonous and joyless. Sometimes it is clear that children are stuck in their play, although different areas of events may be highlighted with a gradual progression to the most disturbing moments of traumatic events. Often feelings of helplessness that were prominent during exposure are reflected in play (Van der Merwe, 1999:211). The pit as metaphorical concept is a helpful construct to enhance posttraumatic play, but also to help children to move beyond the feelings of being stuck as is demonstrated in the following examples:

- A boy (9) who experienced parental homicide drew a figure of superman swinging over the pit. He verbalised his fear that the perpetrator would come back to harm other family members. Using a dragon as metaphor for the perpetrator he said that superman will come to rescue the people who are all deep down in the pit, but superman must first beat the dragon. Reflecting a sense of helplessness he later stated that *"Superman must come to rescue the people, but superman is dead."* A year after the first pit was used, he placed himself about halfway to the top, saying that he is slowly climbing out, but it takes very long. He could list coping options as stepping-stones.
- A girl (9 years old) whose father died violently, initiated posttraumatic play on the drawing of the pit when she drew a tornado with a small play figure representing her father. She spent some time in the session with repetitive play where the father was pulled into the tornado repeatedly and thrown into the air.

The pit as metaphorical concept and application thereof was linked to other metaphorical concepts and talking about being in the pit became part of the language of sessions where it was common to

talk about camel's humps, thorns on the life road, bother worms and poison plans. It is clear from the examples cited that the metaphorical concept of the pit offers children an indirect path that parallels their own difficult situations and which can be used as an instrument to enhance communication and solution-seeking endeavors.

## DISCUSSION

In this article the utilisation of a specific intervention tool has been described. The pit is a common concept that people use metaphorically to indicate their difficulties. It has been found in clinical practice with at least 67 cases that it is a valuable metaphorical concept, which can be applied in many practical ways by drawings or using various containers to represent the pit. The added value is the promotion of a solution-focused and strengths-based approach that is clearly linked to solution-building questions and activities. One of the new directions from this research was the incorporation of play actions with well-known solution-building questions, and also using the pit as a practical way of posing these questions and obtaining answers. The study contributes to theory on solution-building and strengths-based social work practice by offering a specific metaphorical concept as tool.

The various functions of the metaphorical concept were demonstrated by examples from the content analysis of files. Evidence was found that it aids assessment, externalisation of problems, provides a new language and thus facilitates communication, and helps to identify strengths, social support and solutions. It helps children to concretise sometimes vague and unformulated concerns and solutions. Adaptations to the metaphorical concept were mainly by using sensory elements such as clay, candle wax and water and by incorporating related stories. It also enhanced post-traumatic play.

It can be concluded that therapeutic metaphors in general and also the specific metaphorical concept of a pit, combined with solution-building questions and play actions should have a firm place in the intervention armamentarium of those intervening in the lives of troubled children from a strengths-based perspective.

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