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Shared Visibilities: An exploration of the client's use of imagery on the road to UPSR

Tatiana Davis

Sherwood Psychotherapy Training Institute, Nottingham, UK   *Email*: taniadavis1@protonmail.com

Abstract: This article presents findings from research on the interaction between client imagery and Unconditional Positive Self-Regard (UPSR). Through posing the question "What impact does imagery shared within the therapeutic relationship have on UPSR?", the researcher - herself a person-centred therapist - explores issues emerging from her own experience of the use of imagery language in therapy, both as client and therapist. The research also addresses a lacuna within the literature of person-centred therapy, where little has been written on the potential use of shared language and clients' choice of imagery. Data from semi-structured interviews with four women trainee person-centred therapists about their experience of using imagery was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The imagery participants used in their own therapy ranged from physical images drawn by them, to images from dreams or inspired by prayer, reflections on the natural world, and visualisations of the self in different imagined contexts. The discussion suggests that client UPSR is indeed impacted by imagery used in the therapeutic relationship, and that the ability of the client to use their own language in therapy to mediate their experience has a positive impact on the therapeutic relationship. This research contributes a new area of thinking to person-centred work, exploring the role of client language in client-led work, and the benefits for therapists of working with and through the images of their clients.

Keywords: Person-centred psychotherapy, Unconditional Positive Self-regard, IPA, Imagery, Metaphor

This article presents findings from research originally carried out as part of my MSc in Person-Centred and Experiential Psychotherapy at the Sherwood Psychotherapy Training Institute in Nottingham, UK, on the interaction between client imagery and Unconditional Positive Self-Regard (UPSR). The research focusses on core components of person-centred psychotherapy and theory, namely the workings of the relationship between therapist and client and the role of UPSR (a concept originated by the American psychologist, Carl Rogers) in the client's journey of development. Within the therapeutic relationship, the client is shown unconditional positive regard by the therapist, and Roger's theoretical understanding is that this leads to development of UPSR: "If an individual should *experience* only *unconditional positive regard*

… *self-regard* would be unconditional … and the individual would continue to be *psychologically adjusted*, and would be fully functioning" (Rogers, 1990, p. 246)

It is now well established that the relationship and psychological contact between client and therapist are fundamental to the client's sense of feeling safe and understood (Brodley, 1999; Mearns & Thorne, 2013). A core argument in my research is that one way to create such conditions is through the use of shared language, including figurative language or imagery brought by the client. I argue that with the integration of such imagery into the therapeutic process, the therapist is enabled to check out their understanding and offer empathetic reflections using the client's own language. This adds to the client's sense of safety

and hence their capacity to be open and even vulnerable in the relationship. Clients play in their own internal landscape, one that is recognisable to them even if filled with dangers. Given space to shape their view of themselves, using their own words in a subtle but powerful way, clients are empowered to invite their therapist deeper into their world. This is a world, at once familiar, yet open to interpretation - and the therapist can only help with that process by using the client's own language (Mearns & Thorne, 2013).

While Rogers did not write expressly on the role of client language, I see a parallel in his use of the term *personal construct* (Rogers, 1961), borrowed from George Kelly's (1955) exploration of constructs (Walker & Winter, 2007). The idea of personal constructs forms part of Rogers' (1961) seven stages of personality change. It relates to the language clients use directly to describe themselves. I believe the same can be said of language the client uses figuratively, as in imagery and metaphor.

Rogers' stages explore a movement within the client from rigidity to flexibility, from rejection to acceptance including of self. The stages begin with "Personal constructs…are extremely rigid" (Rogers, 1961, p. 132), which I see as imagery used descriptively in a situation that the client can't see as changing. This then progresses to stage 4 where "The ways in which experience is construed are much loosened. There are many fresh discoveries of personal constructs as constructs, and a critical examination and questioning of these." (p. 141). At this stage, the client can begin to use the imagery more creatively, they can change how the situation looks. Finally at stage seven, "Personal constructs are tentatively reformulated, to be validated against further experience, but even then, to be held loosely." (p. 153). Now the client can move freely through their imagery, testing and playing with ideas and behaviours, working out what it feels like to be in a new way.

The pattern of movement is evident in the imagery used by a client, and this creates a way for both client and therapist to observe change in the client's self-view. Here the client takes ownership of their own images and can easily see the changes that have occurred. Doors are open, walls come down, rooms are no longer dark. And then the change in self is given context and meaning, created by the client him or herself. This is my perspective of "shared visibility," namely the change in the client mediated through imagery shared between client and therapist: "It is not only about seeing new connections, but also about creating *shared* visibilities, about promise seen *together* and about *connectedness*. We see therapy as a continuous development and reshaping of shared, providential (promising, inspiring) realities" (Riikonen and Madan-Smith, 1997, p. 5).

The second element of the research, the role of UPSR, explores the nature of change according to person-centred theory. In order for clients to be able to take risks and raise their level of awareness and acceptance of experience, they need to feel themselves in the presence of unconditional positive regard to a minimal degree as stated in the core conditions of person-centred therapy (Rogers, 1957). Further, clients need to own this unconditional positive regard by transforming it into unconditional positive self-regard, so that they can live their lives outside the therapy room and beyond the therapeutic relationship. One way to apply such a powerful feeling to yourself is to begin by trying it out via your own imagery. As the client's description of their image shifts from negative to positive, managed and owned, then that language and perspective can be more easily held and applied to themselves and their reality.

Literature Review

Research, including Levitt (2000) and Evans (1988) highlights the role of client language in indicating change, but doesn't draw a link between language and the client sense (or therapist perception) of UPSR, thereby bringing in a therapeutic outcome. I investigated how UPSR and the self have been explored in research. Some researchers (Flanagan, 2015; Murphy, 2015; Murphy, 2017) viewed UPSR as "core" and "indicative" in the person-centred process and focused on the role of self-perception. The development of a measure for UPSR (Patterson & Joseph, 2006) also focused on self-assessment by the client. Self-regard is best noticed by the self. However, I was curious about UPSR in the context of the therapy, and how it would appear to the therapist as well as be experienced by the client. I was aware of a linguistic link I had witnessed in my own therapy and therapeutic practice, that of figurative language, metaphor, and imagery. A client is unlikely to declare themselves to experience an increase in UPSR, but they may "feel on top of the world" or to have "won the battle." This world of imagery was a clear link for me between self-perception, self-expression, and self-awareness – all key elements in the development of UPSR. This was a clear gap to be explored.

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) analysis of personal metaphorical conceptual systems led me to want to explore the role of therapy, where the system of thinking becomes explicit, with the language of the client becoming the vehicle for transparency. Sims's (2003) work revealed the value of using client metaphor, emphasising the links to relational depth. His 6-stage model speaks to the power of metaphor work but relies on therapist direction and work exclusively undertaken in therapy, unlike my own model. Angus and Rennie (1989)

draw links to the development of ideas of the self through metaphor, but don't link in UPSR.

Similarly, Finlay (2015) describes the co-created use of metaphor in her integrative psychotherapy. She makes the important points that meanings of metaphors are not always self-evident and that it is possible to go beyond visual image to engage different senses in multiple relational ways.

Murphy's work on self-perception indicates the need for research into clients' cognitive affective processing systems (Murphy, 2017, p. 39), which was a cue for me to do this work. Alongside that, there was encouragement from Cirillo and Crider (1995) to explore how metaphors transform over the course of therapy, and from McMullen (1985) to formalise thinking around the role of figurative language in therapy. By drawing together these two ideas, my theory fits into a gap within the person-centred modality, research, and practice, by seeking to explain one way in which some clients use therapy to change via *inventive thinking* (Bohart & Tallman, 1999, p. 67) in a way that other researchers are calling for (Toukmanian, 2010; McMullen, 1985).

I then set this thinking into the context of the therapeutic relationship. As well as reading about relational depth and challenge (Mearns & Cooper, 2003; Schmid & Means, 2006; Wilders, 2013), I wanted to focus on the client's role, as it was their language and their journey to UPSR which was my focus. Bohart and Tallman (1999) were my inspiration here, and although they wrote very little about how clients speak, they wrote a lot about how clients think, and I was able to interpret their ideas from the perspective of imagery use.

Methodology

My philosophical stance as a researcher is to regard knowledge as a narrative construction (McLeod, 2011) and validity as a process (Lepper & Ridding, 2006). Accordingly, the findings presented here should be understood not as conclusive or complete but rather as representative of the phenomenon, e.g., use of imagery in the therapeutic relationship, thus far experienced by my participants.

My method has been driven by the constraints of my master's programme, the needs of my chosen method (IPA - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis), my identity as a person-centred researcher-practitioner and the impact of working alone during Covid pandemic lockdowns. Despite the process of IPA being well-defined (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) the personal impact of writing the original research and now this article during a pandemic cannot be underestimated.

For me, the use of reflexivity has become central to my way of working and am I drawn to engaging relational, constructivist-interpretivist forms (Finlay, 2017). While reflexivity is not seen as a central ingredient with IPA studies, the fact that a "double hermeneutic" is in play suggests a role for the researcher to interrogate their interpretations. Further, this research has been a vehicle for my own development as much as an investigation into a phenomenon. This is explored in a later section.

My first act as researcher was to undertake a heuristic analysis of the phenomenon in my own life (Appendix 1). This focused analysis on how the phenomenon had emerged within and around my own therapy. This in turn enabled me to reflect on how clients who also used imagery language might be experiencing a parallel process.

I next developed a preliminary theoretical position (Appendix 2) showing how I thought the imagery I used was linked with my development of UPSR, and how the changes in the former helped me to process and validate the changes in the latter.

During this time, I was reading around the various topics involved. In addition, I developed my understanding of the phenomenon by completing a theory-building case study focused on a client who had used imagery throughout our work together.

The discovery that this client, too, used imagery to describe themselves, their relationships, and their responses to the world indicated to me that I wasn't alone in using language in this way. I felt that imagery gave the two of us a place where we could "consciously participate" in development (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. 26) and discovery (Bohart & Tallman, 1999, p. 108). This was an invitation to use my own self in the therapeutic relationship (Wosket, 1999), and to reflect on my own use of imagery in the symbolisation of my own experience as a practitioner researcher (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993).

Imagery played several roles in the therapy, both for the client and for myself. Since it was the client's personal language (Mearns & Thorne, 2013, p. 84), it gave me access to that individual on their own terms. Their use of imagery created a "*shared* visibility" (Riikonen & Madan-Smith, 1997, p. 5) of how they saw themselves, allowing me to share that space. I saw this as contributing to an increase in UPSR as well as enhancing the speed of progress "They do not have to put their thoughts into words, they are able to think in terms of images, and that facilitates rapid thinking" (Bohart & Tallman, 1999, p. 47).

Following the completion of that study, I revisited my preliminary theoretical position to ensure that it still held. I also attained ethical approval for my research project, for which I proposed to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I chose IPA as it accords with my worldview that

"human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3).

I also saw IPA as an ally to the person-centred modality, especially through its emphasis on the role of the relationship. As Eatough and Smith note, "the IPA researcher aims to enter into the lifeworld of the participant rather than investigate it; to move between guiding and being led; to be consciously naïve and open; and to be receptive to change and ambiguity" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 30).

Working within this spirit of IPA, I developed my own design for how to conduct the interpretation and analysis of my research data. This design is a combination of many approaches, including Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012), Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez (2011) and McLeod (2011).

1. **Close reading and re-listening**

- Following the interview came a time of immersion in the data alongside a recall of the atmosphere and setting. I made process notes (similar to those I used with clients) to capture my own thoughts at the time.
- At every reading and listening I made observational margin notes on what had potential significance, considering content, language use, context, my reflections and responses at the time.
- I identified and eliminated potentially irrelevant or non-revelatory statements, but didn't delete them, as what was relevant was not clear until all the interviews had been worked with.

2. **Themes and meanings**

- I returned to my notes to identify emerging themes and meanings relating to my research question, aiming for just a few to allow for deeper analysis.
- This involved a higher level of abstraction but still maintained a link to the participant's account.

3. **Connections and groups**

- I examined the themes and meanings and attempted to group them, mindful of my question's focus on the relationship between imagery use and UPSR.

4. **Eidetic reduction**

- I revisited the original transcripts and recordings to ensure that my themes/groups reflected the meaning underlying the participants' words and were a holistic reading of the phenomenon.

- I placed these ideas alongside the creative synthesis of my earlier personal heuristic analysis to gather potential reflections for an appendix.

5. **Description**

- I integrated the meanings outlined into a description of the phenomenon which were presented in my write up and future dissemination.

Forming definitions of core terms appeared an important next step. Firstly, I needed to ensure that I knew what I meant when using the word "imagery" for the sake of internal consistency. In addition, the idiographic nature of the phenomenon means that use of the word imagery requires exploration in dialogue to ensure that the term is understood within the context of the individual and their therapeutic work as well as in the research interview. I eventually arrived at the following definition and used this when recruiting participants: *Mental processes, metaphoric language and analogies you use to understand yourself, changes, and the experience of being you. This doesn't imply the creation or use of physical images or pictures*.

Ethical concerns

A chief concern regarding gaining ethical approval for the research was the potential overlap with my earlier MSc-related case study and the impact that my established theoretical perspective might have on my capacity to investigate the phenomenon in others. I decided to embrace this complexity rather than seek to build a barrier to it (Finlay, 2011). By consistently maintaining a reflexive stance and carefully tracking the emergence of my interpretations, I was confident that the words of my participants would not be dismissed should they not match my own view. I was also confident that my own voice would be given a place, and that my open approach to potential outcomes meant there was no pressure to present the final answer, only the various truths we all held about this experience in our therapeutic lives.

Participants were sent contracting and participant information prior to interview. Participants were not invited to work as co-researchers nor given opportunity to review their transcripts. One participant saw a potential conflict with their own material for research, and initially asked to review their transcript for redaction purposes, but on reflection decided this was no longer necessary. All participants were given 1 month in which to reconsider and withdraw consent. All procedures surrounding consent and withdrawal were outlined in the participant pack and reviewed prior to the interview when final written and verbal consent was obtained.

All participants were made aware of my intent to eventually publish the research. They were given opportunities to withdraw their consent to this specifically. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by me. To protect their anonymity, they are referred to by the number of their interview (P1, P2 etc.).

Each interview included an opportunity to debrief the experience, to ask questions and to explore emotions about being involved in research. These moments were neither recorded nor transcribed. A necessary qualification for participating was being in personal therapy at the time, so that I could be sure they would be safe should the exploration with me lead to revelations that needed more understanding.

Interviews – data collection

Four trainee person-centred therapists engaged in personal therapy, and with experience of using imagery in the therapeutic relationship, were approached. I recruited them from within my training institution. They responded to my call for participants. All four were women, aged 30+, and able to address the role of imagery in their work as client and as therapist. These women were not all from my training cohort, three were friends, one a stranger. Maintaining a consistent structure to the interview and analysis process helped to create the necessary distance for my role as researcher, both from their material and from our common experience as trainees in a shared environment.

The semi-structured interviews lasted 60 minutes and were conducted privately, in person, at the end of 2019. Each interview followed the same format and used the same questions although the semi-structured nature allowed for exploration depending on the answers given.

The questions explored their use of imagery as clients in their own therapy, and the impact of sharing it on the relationship and their sense of self. The majority of material used in this paper was in response to the question "Tell me about whether your use of imagery has impacted your experience of understanding yourself, specifically related to UPSR". I also asked about how imagery use helped them as therapists and gave them an open invitation to explore aspects of imagery that were important but that I hadn't asked about.

Analysis of data

Prior to transcription, I revisited the aims of my study alongside my preliminary theoretical position to ensure I remained on track. I completed an additional conceptual analysis of the central ideas. I also began a more rigorous

recording of my own reflections and thoughts - as a companion to what I read and wrote - in order to help me process my ideas.

The analysis phase was the longest, beginning with transcription and re-listening to the data. I read each interview as a piece in itself, recording my responses and interpretations at each listening and reading. These interpretations (numbering over 500 from the four interviews) took the form of questions, links to what I had read, comparisons with my own experience, thoughts on meaning and other general comments.

Beginning with the first interview as a prototype, I typed them all out and chopped them into individual statements, coded to disguise which questions they related to but in such a way that I could remake the links later. I began to simply engage with them and create categories so that I could see what was emerging. These began with statements on what imagery was, questions and observations which related to the aims and scope of the piece and also other questions and observations which were beyond the aims and scope of the research. I then broke the questions and observations down further into those which related to therapist, client, or relationship. At this point, I reflected that the categories so far were more functional than interpretative. As such, I determined to use them for the other three interviews but only as a way to ensure that I was working within the aims and scope of the piece. Nothing was discarded -- but equally not everything could be included.

As this work progressed through the third and fourth interviews, themes began to emerge: at first, a list of nine (subsequently three: relational depth, UPSR, space). Once the nine themes were identified, each statement was relocated back to its origin in the interpretation, and alongside the primary data of the interview. Then key quotations from each participant were picked out, alongside any examples of imagery used in the interviews. I created new documents for each theme, reflecting as I went on how the original transcript and further interpretation had led me to each aspect of my analysis of the phenomenon. As this was an exploration of language, I paid particular attention to the language of my participants, making lists of key vocabulary for each theme for the Master Table (Appendix 3).

Three months on from my first round of listening, I listened again to each interview in its entirety, without any of the transcripts of notes. I was satisfied that what I had been focusing on in my analysis was there in the words of the participants as well as in my interpretations. There was a match, and it felt like a circle was complete. The weaving in

and out of the levels of data and analysis was a hugely rich and personal experience, one I found hard to step away from.

The next phase, writing up, meant choosing what would be included. At times that process seemed unnatural when the data all clearly belonged together - one phenomenon, many voices, different experiences, but all valid. I moved on knowing that nothing was lost, and could always be returned to, but deadlines and external pressures required that I start to write.

Findings

The findings in an IPA study are found in layers of words and analysis. They arise from the recordings and transcripts of the original interviews, my interpretative marginalia, the themes arrived at, my accompanying reflective journal, the finalised 'master table' of themes (Smith et al. 2009), the creative reflections from my second listening, and the inner experience of doing it all. The challenge is to decide when to stop and when to allow some material to be put aside so something can be written. For the purposes of this article, I present one theme which linked the whole together for me: the process of the development of UPSR in the client, which is made visible through the use of imagery in therapy as well as being given language and space to develop.

IPA as a method is "descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and interpretative because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Before moving on to my interpretations, I therefore begin by sharing the descriptions the participants themselves used about imagery, the role that imagery played in therapy for them, and how it worked to boost their UPSR.

(In the extracts from interviews that follow, each participant is identified by a number between 1 and 4.)

Examples of images from the interviews

To provide some context, here are four images which the participants brought in their interviews. Each one gives a different example of the ways imagery creates a bridge between inner experience and outer expression, as well as how imagery can play a role within the individual's understanding of themselves.

> In my head it has no physical presence …I can't touch this place … but … having gone back a few times there are different rooms that are sometimes there and sometimes not there…upstairs it's like a building project in process … and I open the door and it's got a beautiful bedroom that's completely done out and its lovely and other times you open it, and it's dusty and dank and it's got big beams that are cracked and there's a dripping through the ceiling (P1)

Imagery here is an expression of how awareness of your own state of being can shift and be unpredictable, moving from comfortable to threatening, paralleling the emotional experience of growing self-awareness during training. There is a fullness in the experiential nature of moving between spaces which is easily relatable.

> it's almost like the leaves on a tree … are dependent on what's come through the roots and got there. If I think about my thoughts without my imagery and all the other things that I have brought into my awareness, there wouldn't be very many leaves on that tree whereas now there's a lot there (P2)

This description of the research process shows imagery as a way to explain your process to someone else, capturing more of the experience than just an answer to a question. The process of growth and parallels to nature express a personal journey, yet externalised in a way that can be seen and appreciated.

> an image of a test tube came and it was bubbling up and going down bubbling up and it was a bit like my dilemma and … so I … instantly by just knowing the test tube I knew what was going off for me. (P3)

Imagery is a way to encapsulate a complex thought process, here a dilemma about future paths, through an analogous image of a state of flux. The image doesn't solve the dilemma nor simplifies it, but values the space given for the uncertainty in a contained yet fluid way.

> I'm going to challenge that image of something being holistic and round and perfect and what I'm actually gonna do is visualise an image, does my whole look like the sum total of all my parts, yeah it's all over the place there's frequencies everywhere there's jaggedness there's softness and so actually it really helps me to understand that my whole self and all of my experiences are different textures they're different shapes they've been on my collage of my life as I look at it (P4)

This participant used imagery actively as a way to experiment with their sense of self, that may be beyond awareness or have been previously rejected or painful to hold, to try it out and see if it can become reality for them. The complexity of a holistic image being both needed and rejected can be managed when the image is adapted to represent the experience of self.

Participant perspectives on imagery

I use it as shorthand I have a similar sense of familiarity about it … I'm using it as a particular example of an experience (P1).

There is my image which is described in words rather than me being described in words, there's something behind my words … it's another way to communicate (P2).

It says and feels more knowledgeable and insightful and giving me information on how I am… and they offer some comfort quite often as well (P3).

It was a really useful shortcut for me to be able to explain where I was at that day…I can sit there and I can play it out in front of me … it creates that little bit of space (P4).

From all these examples, we see how imagery occupies a place within the relationship as well as within the individual client. The capacity of the image to convey an unspoken or as yet unaware understanding is powerful, as is its ability to convey much more than can be expressed. The knowledge an image provides also comes with a sense of security, familiarity, comfort, play; a sense that this is a safe space in which to work. The distance from the immediacy of the emotional state allows for more gradual acceptance of it, and of its changes, as in narrative work.

Telling a story in therapy appeared to be a means of initially maintaining distance from the inner disturbance while still exploring a personal issue (McLeod, 1997). This work is entirely client-led, assuming the therapist works with the images provided by the client and gains sufficient understanding of them in their frame of reference. That doesn't imply it is just a place of comfort or a place that encourages stuckness or defensiveness. Rather, playing with the language allows gradual control of the reality the client experiences, and the experimental place for tweaks to see what could be.

As the extracts below illustrate, images seem to have the power to promote UPSR as the individual client moves from accepting to loving the image. In fact, the very act of working in images seems to boost UPSR:

Me being comfortable and maybe showing that aspect of myself…was a real deepening of my understanding of what was going on and maybe my own process and seeing "oh it's like this" (P1).

Through the imagery comes a sense of congruence…in that increased congruence, there's more space for self-regard (P2).

Sometimes I've gone to therapy and I've just think I don't want to hear myself talk today … and it's like the image allows me to still talk about the same thing that I probably need to and want to … but … I don't judge it or get as annoyed by it (P3).

It's a really useful tool because as I get overwhelmed and I try and create thoughts … so it's just a much friendlier language for me to use (P4).

For my participants in their experience of being a client, the very mechanism of working in the language of imagery rather than plain language offers the possibility of a gentler, more compassionate way of talking about the self.

For the therapist, the ability to be able to offer UPR to that image simply by acknowledging its value or even expressing care for it, means that the shared image becomes a place where compassion is expressed, first by one part of the dyad and then the other. That vulnerable place is scary, and perhaps it is easier for the client to have their image validated and regarded rather than their vulnerable self. But if they see the image as worthy of compassion, then the possibility that the aspect of self it represents to them is also worthy of the same. Over time the UPSR has a new place to grow in.

I now turn from the descriptive to more interpretative spaces.

Interpretation

Reflecting on the general purpose of imagery use, Participant 1 talked about how such use could provide a safe way to work with difficult emotions:

Noticing that my way of operating was… really negative … I was very critical … so I guess by playing with it with an image it feels safer … because … its … less abstract so it allows me to come … outside of myself and look at it in a more objective way … and describe what's going on for myself (P1).

I interpreted this as a process of moving through levels of deeper description, with the image giving both the capacity to name or give language to an inner experience, and also the objectivity needed to move beyond the *status quo*. This is where distorted awareness of, or denial of the truth about, self (Rogers, 1990) can be questioned and seen as not permanent.

Participant 1's next realisation came as they reflected on their image of a locked cage:

This particular [image] served a really good function at a particular time, I'm now in a different time and different space … and being able to then go "oh actually, part of this is really helpful um but there is part of it that's not helpful" and so … I guess that's where my understanding moved from part of it from going "oh my goodness I'm in a cage" to "ok I wanna get out the cage" (yeah) to 'ok this cage has a beauty and a function' you know … my image is changing as we're talking so that's quite really cool … so … I'm left with a little gold shiny … wire cage (P1).

My interpretative work here explored the function of the change in the image as mirroring the change in the understanding of the self, and the increase in compassion and UPSR for that self. Here the image becomes a way to support rather than the voice of a critic. The capacity to change the image can be an initial step in realising our capacity to change the aspect of self it reflects – in this case, the freedom to move. As Kopp and Craw (1998) observe: "The process of shifting between their explored and transformed metaphoric imagery and their current life problem creates the potential for new insights into the nature of the problem." (Kopp & Craw, 1998, p. 309)

This change in self-awareness through a reconsidering of the image of self has been called "the liberation of metaphorizing" by Evans (1988) and "metaphor cognition" by Kopp and Craw (1998). I see this process as an example of imagery use, one where the participant moves from description to awareness, then realisation and finally metamorphosis. The imagery is not discarded as wrong, but adapted, much as the different aspects of self are. This is how Participant 1 puts it:

My experience of talking about it now is that it's changed and so what I'm left with is an image … that actually now in terms of self-regard I would go, you know what, that is a really useful thing, it just wasn't useful in the context that I'd put myself in (P1).

The acceptance of the shift in awareness brings about UPSR in the client (Rogers, 1990). This self-compassion turns the negative into a positive. "Rather than fighting against it," note (Griffiths & Griffiths, 2013, p. 169), we respond "with a kindness and understanding that we typically would give to others."

The second participant reflected on how using imagery created space to work with self within the therapeutic relationship. For Participant 2, the acceptance of her images allowed for *her* acceptance, both by her therapist and by her own self:

So it was that being met, with my imagery as wel l… which is an unusual space … being met with your imagery, um, means there's a part of you that's also allowed to be (P2)

I interpreted this "unusual space" as potentially risky yet also precious and safe enough for exploration and vulnerability. In addition, it appeared *growthful*: in Reineke's words, a "site of symbol-making" (Reineke, 2007, p. 92), with the potential for the client to build understanding and apply UPSR on their own terms and in their own language.

The "being met" is a crucial element; relational depth plays a vital role in the use of imagery work. By offering empathy in this space, the therapist "encompasses not only what obviously exists but also what seems to be on an unspoken and probably even on a not-quite-aware level, verbalizing what the client shows but is not yet able to symbolize themselves (Schmid & Mearns, 2006)

Participant 2 described it thus:

The [use of imagery] in therapy has given voice to something that was part of me that … didn't necessarily fit … it's made it okay to be like that (P2).

Here again I interpret the use of imagery as an opportunity for the development of UPSR and the client's realisation that it is developing. The idea of 'fit' seems to represent changing expectations, with growthful acceptance of self being the beginnings of UPSR.

Participant 3 reflected on how imagery allowed them to safely work with parts of themselves that were fragile or vulnerable. Her comments emphasised the importance of achieving sufficient relational depth in imagery work; such depth needed to be there in order for a place of safety to be established: one where the client's vulnerability could first be seen and then offered UPR. As Participant 3 put it:

When I think of myself alone or feeling sad I just picture that that little [me] in there …she's well-hidden, say "it's okay, it's okay, I'm just outside the door -- you don't have to come out but I'm just here". …

So, it does help because I can't talk about it, because I don't know what to say, but I can visualise it… I can feel it and I can see it, yeah, but we don't have to put a big summary to it … That you can have as much exploration as you want … inside the safety of your own head … not to judge myself or be harsh or try and eradicate something that you really can't because that's part of you (P3).

Experiencing the sharing of imagery leads to insight, and sharing that insight leads to confidence. This suggests that the use of imagery is to be encouraged as a way to facilitate relational depth as well as client UPSR. "If psychotherapy is seen as a quest for clients to make sense of themselves and their histories…then in this process…clients can be seen as

searching for more coherent and encompassing personal metaphors" (Riikonen & Madan-Smith, 1997).

Participant 4 identified how UPSR is expressed through imagery, and how the imagery can be worked on to incorporate shifts in awareness. Here, understanding your own imagery, and the story it tells you, is crucial:

> So it really helps me to understand that my whole self and all of my experiences are different textures they're different shapes they've been, um, on my collage of my life … so I can use all of these different ways of presenting stuff to just number one acknowledge and then secondly just accept … just realising that actually it's okay to just be multi-textured, it's okay to be all of these things is so lovely because it allows me to just be more of my organic self with myself (P4).

This is clearly the client's process, with a role outside therapy as well as within the therapeutic relationship. We may witness this as therapists and make a valuable contribution by applying UPR to the new understanding, but this is essentially a technique the client can use on their journey, long after the relationship has ended.

Here imagery is used successfully to build awareness of the newly adjusted sense of self, towards the goal of building UPSR. As Chaika (2000) points out: "The metaphor allows the patient to transcend that context through reference to another context…This simultaneously reveals to the patient his or her capacity to shift out of a context, which previously was thought to be immutable" (Chaika, 2000, pp. 109-10).

This realisation is built and explored through the language the client choses, ending in new ways of thinking about the self: "Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorise them, group them, and quantify them – and, by this means, reason about them" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 25).

The imagery acts as the vehicle by which new material is integrated: "It is no longer the case that experiences have to be denied if they cannot be symbolised accurately, as there is now the possibility that any inconsistent material can be subsumed within one or other part of the self-structure" (Cooper, 1999, as cited in McMillan, 2004, p. 33).

Concluding Discussion

My preliminary theoretical position, that client language use can be linked to an increase in UPSR, has been borne out by the data presented here. Engaging in the imagery presented

by clients also has an impact on the relationship between therapist and client, as well as on the use of self in the therapist (Wosket, 1999).

At the start of this research, I placed some emphasis on defining key terms such as imagery. In the end, however, the experience of using a specific image proved more important than a didactic description of what imagery might be. The idea of an internal or "inner artefact" (Taylor, 2020) proved crucial; there was something special pertaining to the words and the mind, irrespective of whether the imagery was linked to a physical experience. The interviews revealed that the imagery my participants used in their own therapy came from a wide range of sources. They included physical images drawn by them, images from dreams or inspired by prayer, work following body mapping or focusing activities, reflections on the natural world, and various visualisations of the self in different imagined contexts.

While conducting the research, I attempted a *phenomenological reduction* (Shinebourne, 2011) on many levels, whether when exploring my own experience of the phenomenon, guiding participants during interviews, or leading myself back through the merging of words and perspectives towards some form of understanding. I found myself raising potentially controversial questions about the way person-centred therapists approach language and thinking, aspects which seem to be seen as the poor relation of physical sensation and raw emotion. There is much debate to be had over whether imagery is a cognitive, emotional, or even physical process, but for me it has a definite cognitive element which means that as therapists we need to attend to thoughts in the thinking space, and not work with clients to move everything into the realm of sensation in order for it to make sense or have impact. There are ethical implications to this, as well as fundamental philosophical questions about directivity and autonomy. I see it as essential to explore how we use language as therapists (and clients), rather than leave such common, everyday experiences unexplored.

I was a novice phenomenological researcher so I appreciate there is room to engage the reductive processes more to deepen my phenomenological analysis to be even more layered and evocative. I see also that I tended to focus on imagery in cognitive-perceptual terms, emphasizing my conceptual analysis, and that I could have done more to grapple with embodied inter-subjective lifeworld meanings more holistically.

As an IPA study, this research had striven neither for generalisability nor for pure description. I am making claims to insight found through the analytical process. Smith (1999) argues for research to be judged on how "illuminating" it is; my hope is that I have not simply illuminated the phenomenon in question but also shone a light on my own processes,

enough to make it clear where my conclusions come from (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

I am hopeful that my findings are considered trustworthy within the framework of IPA and according to Yardley's (2000) criteria. I believe I showed *sensitivity* to the data at every stage. My depth of analysis shows *rigour*, and my description of process shows *transparency*. I believe my results are yet to pass the final test, "real validity lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful" (Yardley, 2000, as cited in Shinebourne, 2011, p. 26).

I consider the strengths of my piece to lie in my use of *reflexivity* and conceptual analysis, and in my viewing them as ethical as well as theoretical principles. The depth and layers of analysis (what I call my dance with the data) have made the research unwieldy at times, but they were what gave me sight of the phenomenon in its richness. As the phenomenon is one that I shared with my participants, the role of reflexivity in IPA work (Alase, 2017) formed an important element of my ethical stance. As Rodham et al. (2015, p. 6) underline, "Maintaining a curious stance and actively engaging in reflexivity are therefore key skills for doing IPA." In addition, the collaborative analysis meant that my voice would find its place alongside that of my participants (Smith et al., 2009).

A weakness of this research is that I perhaps attempted to take on too much; it would have been useful to have had more experienced co-researchers to help with theme development and analysis. I feel the initial interviews showed too much bias in my questioning and responses, and having arrived at my themes I wished I could have conducted them again. My limitations as a researcher, working alone during a global pandemic, became all too evident.

Despite this, I feel confident that I have added something new to the canon of person-centred theoretical understanding, especially regarding the role of the client in therapy. Any research that causes a therapist to be curious about how they work or how their client experiences the world has something to contribute. All my participants agreed that awareness of this phenomenon enriched their practice and client experience.

Conducting this research has had important implications for my own practice. It has also introduced me to the wonders of psychotherapeutic research. There is room for new ideas in the person-centred world, and the roles of language and thinking remain areas in need of investigation. As Husserl indicates, notes Worsley (200, p. 78), "the Thing-in-Itself in the outside world is finally inexpressible, but not wholly unknowable. Therefore, metaphor expresses in itself some of the hidden qualities of the real object.").

I cannot know the phenomenon from the perspective of another. All I can do is draw conclusions on the basis of my interpretation of a shared phenomenon in the description of another's experience. The phenomenon is no longer wholly unknowable. I would add that I now see the opposite is possible – that the hidden qualities of the person are expressed through the metaphors they use, and that, by studying them, we and they can learn much about how to regard, or even love, ourselves better.

Implications for practice

Through my research, and from experience working with this phenomenon as client and therapist, I would like to draw out some implications for practice upon which therapists can reflect.

For the imagery to be of most use in the dyad and in the mind of the client, it is essential for therapists to remember the place of non-directivity in this work. By that I mean that imagery and its interpretations should belong to the client, and that any attempt to introduce imagery by the therapists, or for the therapist to provide their own interpretation of client imagery, should be handled with care and open communication. Working with the imagery will involve achieving a mutual understanding of it; the therapist's voice is needed here, but what the client sees takes precedence.

Imagery work can be a way to invite the client deeper into the process of their own therapy. By providing a language for discussing change and development, the imagery shared in the therapy allows for comment and reflection on what the therapy has supported in the client. This makes the process more visible and can encourage a conversation about the therapy between client and therapist which doesn't rely on the use of theoretical terminology, or defaults to an expert stance in the therapist, but is equally accessible to both parts of the relationship. This can help demystify the process of healing for the client, enabling them to own their growth, and continue growing once the relationship has ended.

Just as the therapy room is a space set aside for therapeutic work, accessing the mental landscape of imagery and metaphor allows a space for internal therapeutic work. By developing autonomy in interpreting and manipulating imagery, the client has a safe and contained space to continue in relationship with themselves, both between sessions and beyond therapy. By working in this space and valuing it in the therapeutic relationship, this capacity can be brought more into the active awareness of the client, as an important resource for their future wellbeing. The same is of course true for the therapist, who has this work to do themselves, as well as learning ways to be in this space with clients who use imagery.

Rationale and Reflection: My Own Experience

I understand myself and my world through analogous imagery. I don't know when that habit began, but through my therapeutic relationships I have learned to harness it. Figures 1-4 below show something of my growth and use of imagery for personal development.

This first extract represents an early attempt by me to capture my way of understanding:

In me there are two rooms.
The bright and the dark.
I want to live in the bright one, but keep forgetting and end up in the dark again.
The dark room is very familiar and comfortable, it's a good place to hide and feel safe, but it is also a place of deep hurt and painful memories. I feel bad in there, but as feeling bad is in itself familiar and comfortable, it is an easy place to be.
I know I shouldn't go in there, but to attempt to drive myself out I turn on the lights. This sharp light throws everything into stark relief and shadows, and brings with it the voice of blame and guilt. I berate myself for being there, and cope instead by staying longer.
The bright room is a place of positivity and peace, but not yet of rest. It doesn't provide enough comfort and isn't familiar so I don't feel safe there. I want to be there, but it's harder and so I don't stay long. I live in fear of the brightness turning out to be false, and sometimes it feels like it belongs to someone else.

Figure 1: Extract from personal reflection, 18/11/17

I still recognise myself as living between dark and light rooms, but now I have shifted the awareness of the image and I have learned how to move between them, and so I do, like walking from sunlight to shade on my daily walk.

This understanding has become empowering.

This is the phenomenon for me.
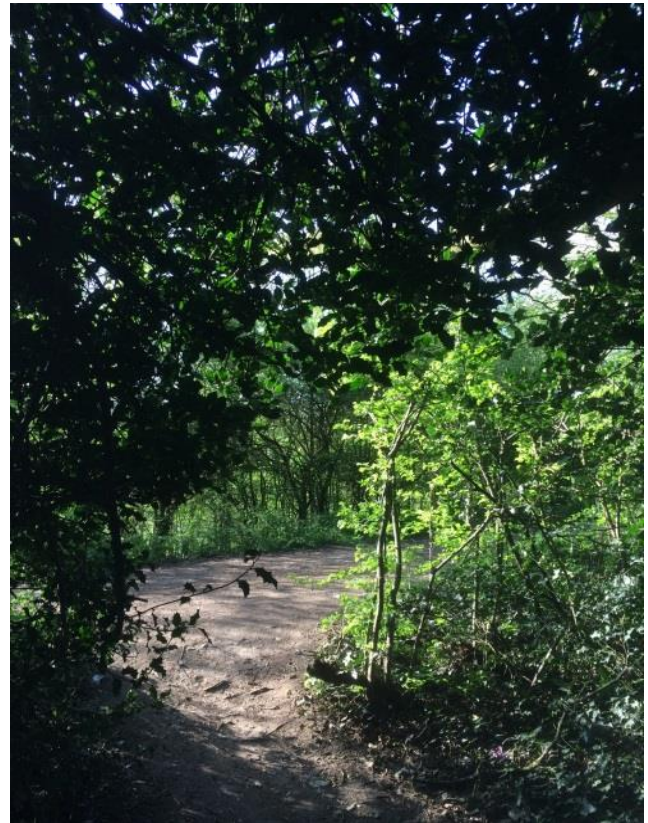
Figure 2: The view from the dark "secret bit" back to the sunlit path, Charnwood Water, 14/4/20

During my own personal therapy, I once experienced a flash of myself as a tree, desperate to grow, but restricted by woven red threads from the past. I took that image to therapy, and together my therapist and I looked again at the threads and the tree, exploring the roots of both, and what they meant, now and in the past. The image underwent transformation, and I gained the power to unwrap the tree. The tree which once was bound and restricted in red threads could be set free, with the threads transformed into crocheted flowers. The past was not escaped but reinterpreted and reintegrated into a life which moves forwards with new confidence and understanding. Those trees became loved, and my own self became more lovable.

The image helped provide the context for this new self-regard, offering a route that was far easier than me simply trying to will it into existence. My therapist's ability to work with my own image allowed the therapist to direct their UPR right into the centre of the conflict in me. I could hold it there because this was my safe space to work in.

Figure 3: Sculpture of bound yet blooming tree, SPTI Research Showcase, March 2020)

Alongside the writing of the research for my dissertation and this article, I also presented aspects of this research and its journey at two Sherwood Institute Research Showcases, a British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy research conference and the World Association for Person Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy conference in Copenhagen. Each presentation was accompanied by further reflection and the creation of artwork to accompany the words. These both provided inspiration and comfort and encouraged my deeper engagement with imagery and self-reflection.

Figure 4: Slide from my PCEP2022 presentation, July 2022, Copenhagen

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About the Author

Tatiana Davis is a person-centred psychotherapist in private practice in Loughborough. Her practice, Kusudama Therapy, is named after the origami form which has so enriched her life. She earned her master's degree in Person-centred and Experiential Psychotherapy in 2020 from the Sherwood Psychotherapy Training Institute, Nottingham, UK. Her research interests are focused on the development of "small r" research; the everyday work of reflection and curiosity which impacts every psychotherapist but is rarely examined or explored.
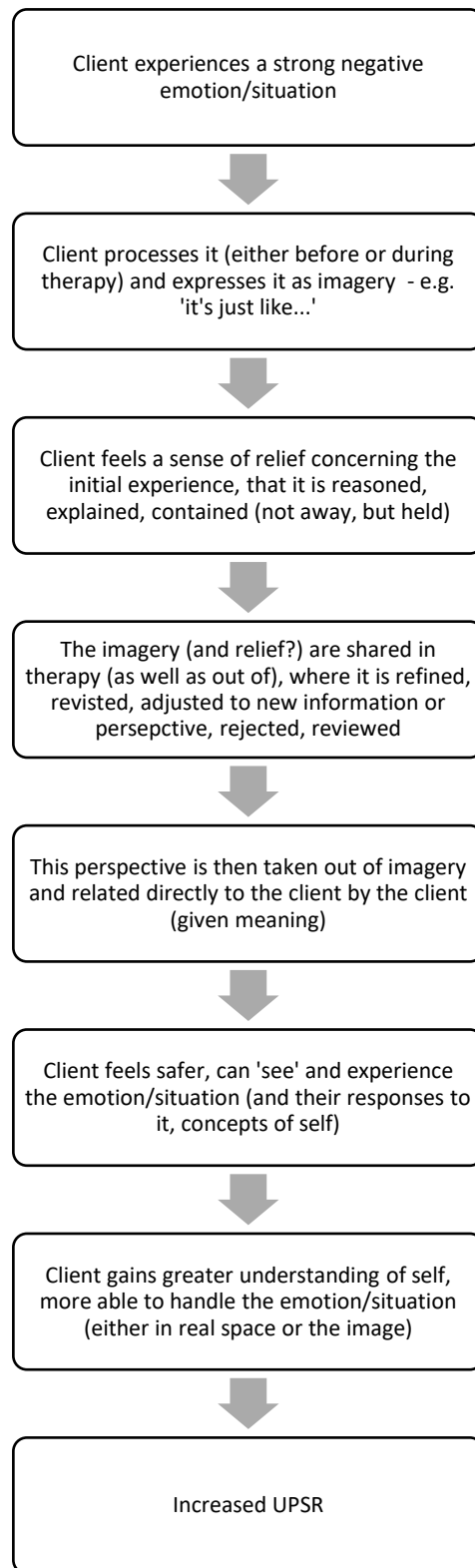
Appendices

Appendix 1: Heuristic Analysis
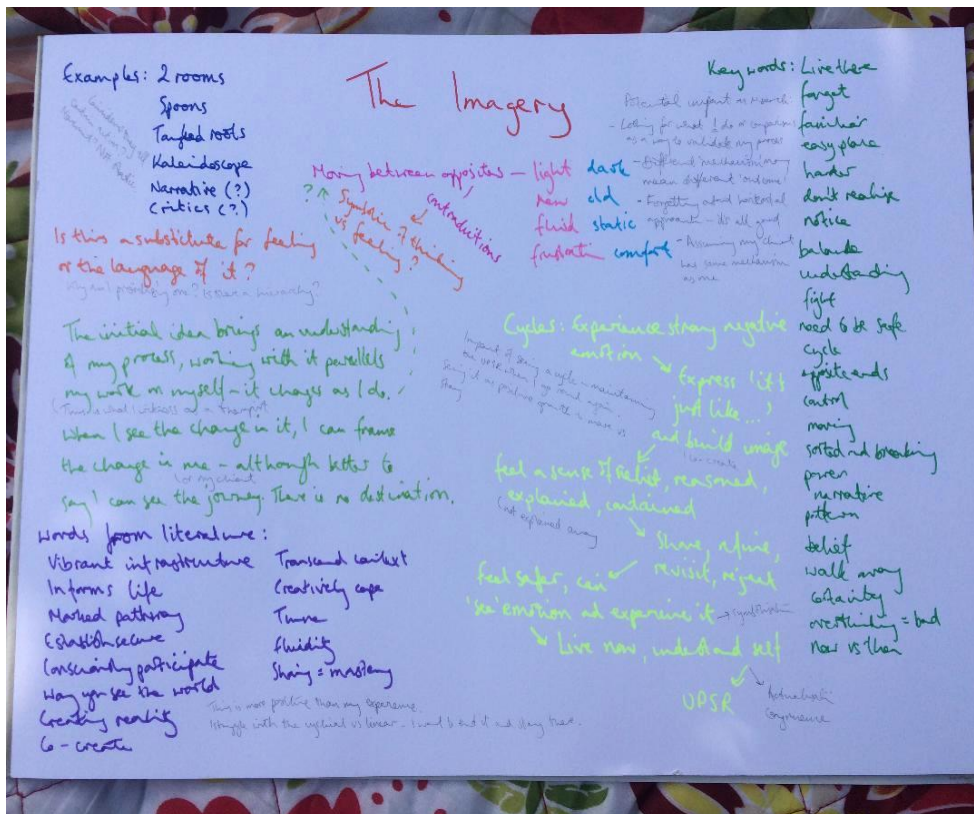
Appendix 2: Preliminary Theoretical Position

Interrelationship between imagery shared in therapy and client UPSR:

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│   Client experiences a strong        │
│   negative emotion/situation         │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Client processes it (either before  │
│  or during therapy) and expresses it │
│  as imagery - e.g. 'it's just like...'│
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Client feels a sense of relief      │
│  concerning the initial experience,  │
│  that it is reasoned, explained,     │
│  contained (not away, but held)      │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  The imagery (and relief?) are       │
│  shared in therapy (as well as out   │
│  of), where it is refined, revisted, │
│  adjusted to new information or      │
│  persepctive, rejected, reviewed     │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  This perspective is then taken out  │
│  of imagery and related directly to  │
│  the client by the client (given     │
│  meaning)                            │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Client feels safer, can 'see' and   │
│  experience the emotion/situation    │
│  (and their responses to it,         │
│  concepts of self)                   │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Client gains greater understanding  │
│  of self, more able to handle the    │
│  emotion/situation (either in real   │
│  space or the image)                 │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│           Increased UPSR             │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Appendix 3: Master Table

IPA involves the creation of tables of themes, especially the 'master table'. "What you are doing here is using the table or index of themes as the basis for an account of the participants' responses which should take the form of your argument interspersed with verbatim extracts from the transcripts to support your case" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 227). The purpose is to present the themes within the context of each other and the evidence that led to their appearance in my research thinking. My master table involves the three main themes I saw as being interlinked, and forming a mechanism whereby the imagery work created a space in which the relationship deepened and UPSR developed.

Main Theme	Relational depth	Space		UPSR and the self	
Aspects	Relational depth leading to imagery use Imagery use leading to relational depth	What its is/like	What you do there	Shift in acceptance	
Key words (from transcript and interpretation)	Connection words: • connection • deepen • connecting • being me • received • connection • relational depth • engaging • engage • working relationship • in tune • real depth • knows me • collective • capture • encapsulated • rapport Knowing words: • bring in …experience • point of view • what's going on • understand • frame of reference • given voice to something • good to know • he got that	A pretend place Objective Unusual Space behind my words Distance Creative space A flow Mediating force Expansive A journey Freedom Safety Facility Particular place New place Relief Valuable Projected out Between Third person Transcending	Imagine myself Put yourself Come outside myself Work Build meaning Play something out Broaden reality out Hold everything Self regard Expand ideas Process Held in between stages Deal with anxiety Work away from emotions Objective approach Arrive at a structure Assemble data Realisation Plot where somebody is Create own space	familiarity recognition moment to moment understanding change development describe change to self different is helpful shift benchmark change of context defaults become visible function change acceptance self-discovery allowed to be flow movement fragments, parts congruence provocative reimagine movement in self embrace check in indicator origins identify conflict	separate whole acknowledge changing states noticing how operate capacity to change ownership organic reassurance inside shift in congruence grounding fluid holding fit move towards understanding validating it truths UPR→ UPSR receive offering symbolic of life shift in judgement image tells me truth regarded imperfections revealed vulnerable allowed realisation
P1	1P15 'a way to deepen the kind of connection through the image to my therapist'	1P40 'it allows me to come…outside of myself and look at it in a more objective way'		1P46 ''this particular thing served a really good function at a particular time, I'm now in a different time and different space…that's where my understanding moved'	
P2	2P61 'a different level of connection…I can only say relational depth'	2P10 'an unusual space'		2P12 'being met with your imagery means there's a part of you that's also allowed to be'	
P3	3P59 'kind of feeling a little bit in tune…well a lot actually'	3P59 'allows me to still talk about the same thing…but I don't judge it'		3P38 'not to judge myself or be harsh or try and eradiacte something that you really can't because that's part of you'	
P4	4P5 ' helped create some real depth in between us'	4P11 'the space where I can do a bit of work'		4P36 'just realising that actually its ok to be multi-textured…it allows me to just be more of my organic self with myself'	