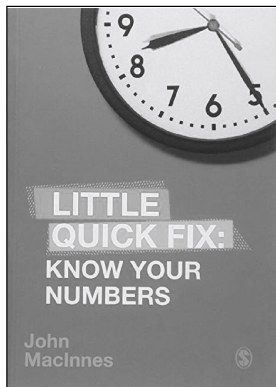


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Focus on Research:
Little Quick Fix Series
Reviewed by Celia Chambers,
page 16

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Using illustrative cards to work creatively

CLAIRE BOWERS shares how she began to use cards from a family boardgame to explore attachment issues with clients

FLASHBACK TO CHRISTMAS 2017, I learnt about the boardgame 'Dixit', by Libellud Games*. In short the game, which 'leads you and your friends and family on a journey through your imagination', requires players to tell a short story from the cards they are dealt. Other players then choose the card that they feel best meets their own interpretation.

In playing the game with friends and family, I was curious about the range of interpretations that people gave. I was also frustrated by the fact that my interpretation, often so clear to me, was not always understood by others! The cards evoked in me, not only verbal interpretations but also, at times, emotional responses to the beautiful imagery. I began to explore how I could use these cards to work with clients.

Throughout this essay I will present ways in which I have used these cards in client work, particularly for exploring attachment to others, and considerations for doing so. All examples are shared with client permission but all names and identifiers have been changed.

Using the card images to deepen affect and deconfuse the Child ego state

'Interventions that deepen affect include empathetic responding and enquiry into the affect the client is expressing. . . well-timed interpretation can also deepen affect, particularly hidden feelings or those being defended against.' (Widdowson, 2010:262)

Marie presented with depression, anxiety and addictive behaviours. She had difficulty in expressing her emotions healthily and making her needs known.

Marie exhibited severe separation anxiety (Bowlby, 1983, p27) and was unable to separate from loved ones, expressing a fear of catastrophe at the thought of being alone. Initially, Marie was unable to understand from where this fear originated but on exploration, we learnt that she was unable to separate from her mother at school. Her mother would also become very upset and Marie felt the need to comfort her.

Marie and her husband had complementary scripts, resulting in a symbiosis being formed which continued the attachment behaviours formed in childhood (Stewart & Joines, 2012, p218). She believed that she couldn't

cope without him and his behaviours and overt care of her reinforced this belief.

Each time Marie experienced an authentic 'need', eg the need for comfort, when emotional, or the need for reassurance when anxious, she reported feeling a sense of panic and would often report friends and family telling her 'you have nothing to feel anxious or depressed about' at these times.

Although Marie had no words to express her feelings or needs – and would become anxious in sessions – I would often find myself feeling a sense of extreme sadness after being with her, which I believe was a concordant countertransference response to her historical lack of having her feelings tolerated (Clarkson, 1991, p101; Hargaden & Sills, 2008, p60, p136).

Aware that I needed to be able to hold these feelings for her, and help her become aware of them in herself, I presented her with a set of Dixit cards to explore and invited her to select ones that expressed how she felt. On discovering this was an effective (and affective) tool for Marie, it was something we repeated throughout the therapy when she struggled to find words to express her feelings. A card, showing a girl carrying an oversized wrapped gift from one such occasion is explored below.

Marie selected this card and when asked to describe it, stated that 'the box is so beautifully wrapped and pretty to look at... yet the girl carrying it looks really uncomfortable... and I don't think there is anything in it that's heavy.' Using this card, we explored possibilities of why the box might be hard to carry – even though it looks beautiful from the outside. We worked together to propose ideas for what might be inside that was making it heavy, unbeknownst to people around her. Marie hypothesised that the box may contain 'scary things' that were 'too big' for the girl to carry and that she might need help with them. We talked about how the girl might feel; initially Marie stated that she felt she would be scared and overwhelmed, before realising that she might be 'sad that no-one was helping her'. Using this, we were able to progress the work towards a self-reparenting exercise (James, 1974, p37; Wain, 2018) and replace the injunctions that included 'don't feel' 'don't have needs', 'don't grow up' and 'don't be you' with permissions such

as 'it's ok to ask for help when you feel anxious', 'it's ok to have and show emotion when you feel sad', 'it's ok to do things for yourself.'

As the affect deepened in the therapeutic relationship and Marie began to express what she was feeling and needing in words, change began to happen and the second-degree impasse (Mellor, 1980, p217) that resulted in the disavowing of her own needs and inability to develop a sense of autonomy and independence was resolved.

Using images to explore the content of ego states and personify safe (and unsafe) attachment figures

Emma presented with anxiety and panic attacks that were limiting her daily life. She stated that she had 'internal voices' putting her down and making her feel bad about herself, others and the world. I introduced her to ego states and we began exploring the introjected messages (Perls et al, 1951, in Hargaden & Sills 2003, p85) in her Parent ego state and the fixated beliefs (Novy et al, 1993, in Hargaden & Sills, 2003, p221) in her Child ego state.

Having briefly explained first order structural ego states to Emma, I asked her to think about any messages that she had received as a child that came to mind when she was experiencing the 'internal voices'. She struggled to do this.

I provided Emma with a set of Dixit cards and asked her to find any that reminded her of parents, caregivers and influential people from her childhood. She chose a card with a darkened forest scene and small ghosts and we explored it together.

Emma explained that she did not feel she had had appropriate caregivers in her past – that they felt 'ghostlike' to her and she was unable to draw on 'useful' information from them. She also explained that there were times when her caregivers had been 'frightening' and abusive. Holding this card, Emma was able to recall messages including 'you ruined my life', 'I'm disgusted by you', 'you're a slapper'. These toxic messages had been introjected into Emma's Parent ego state as a result of not having full, attuned and empathetic contact with these caregivers (Perls 1978, in Hargaden & Sills, 2003, p89).

We discussed the internal reactions of scare and shame associated with these messages which led to the discovery of the card representing Emma's Child ego state; this was of a child sitting on the floor surrounded by a 'fort' of play cubes, with his face half covered by his arms and holding a pair of binoculars.

Emma then became able to talk about what her 'little self' needed in terms of comfort and protection – she began to be able to express the feelings, needs and desires that had been repressed in childhood and healing began (Retief and Conroy, 1997, p45).

Emma continued to make her needs and desires known. We used her newly strengthened Adult ego state to create a set of attributes that were desirable to her as forming part of her Parent ego state before updating her Parent ego state with new messages that soothed and supported her Child ego state (James, 1974, p33).

Emma chose another card to represent this safe and nurturing part of herself and chose to keep it in her purse as a reminder.

Using images to explore generational scripts

'Life scripts can be transmitted from one generation to the next ...

They may also play certain rigid roles within the family.' (Noriega, 2004, p312)

One of the most valuable and powerful ways of using the cards was to create a family constellation (Hellinger, 1998 in McQuillin and Welford, 2017) to explore how behaviours had been passed down through a client's family in the form of 'Hot Potatoes' (English, 1969) and transgenerational scripting (Noriega, 2004). While I am unwilling to share a photograph of the completed constellation due to its sensitive and identifying nature, I will discuss below the steps that I took (McQuillin and Welford, 2013)

Contracting and protection

Having formulated a treatment plan and established a firm therapeutic relationship with Heather, I began to notice historical patterns emerging in terms of what she was sharing with me.

Heather had a history of alcohol and drug abuse and this behaviour was also present in her mother and siblings. It had been normalised by the family unit and messages regarding alcohol being the only option for coping mechanisms had been passed down through the generation (Noriega, 2004, p315).

Heather and I spoke at length about her goals for therapy before contracting to explore the bonds between different family members and 'unhealthy' messages and behaviours that had been passed down. It was important to make Heather aware that she may discover some painful and difficult revelations about herself and others; and for me to be confident enough that I could provide sufficient Protection (Steiner, 1968, p63; Tudor, 2016, p56) for her, and for myself in supervision, throughout this process (McQuillin and Welford, 2013, p358).

The process

I encouraged Heather to look through a set of Dixit cards to find cards that represented different members of her family. Due to not knowing her family beyond her parents, Heather chose to begin at a parental level and work down to her grandchildren but exploration can

begin much further back.

Each card and associated family member was discussed in detail and each family member given the respect that they deserved. I also felt it important to provide Heather with sufficient Protection to express any anger and hurt held towards the family members.

Injunctions, permissions and counter injunctions were identified for each member in addition to colluding behaviours, abusive patterns and secrets (McQuillin and Welford, 2013, p358). Each card was glued to a large sheet of paper with names, descriptions, histories and behaviours of each family member.

The outcome

Heather, who found this work hugely healing, used it for her Alcoholics Anonymous Step 4 – 'Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves' (AA in Finlay, 2014, p56). She identified family histories and patterns that she realised she had passed on to her own children. Heather became aware of points at which she had discounted the effects of her drinking and drug taking behaviours on her children and grandchildren and made a decision to begin to heal these ruptures by seeking out new alternatives for moving forward.

Summary

In using the cards, I have learnt the importance of providing Protection for the clients in terms of any feelings and memories that the card evokes and contracting around how the cards will be used.

If you choose to use these, be aware that clients may want to keep the cards: Emma chose to keep a card in her purse and Heather kept her family constellation. In a closing therapy session, she told me that she planned to burn it to signify coming to the end of her 12 steps and having a new start.

I believe that TA offers itself to a high level of creativity as a psychotherapeutic modality due to the metaphor of the Child ego state. Working creatively with these cards involves using intuition to support the client to access the nonverbal or suppressed parts of themselves which, in turn, enables them to 'express the inarticulate speech of the heart' (Hargaden & Sills, 2003, p199). We are then able to use the therapeutic relationship to explore what arises, and use therapeutic techniques, in addition to the transference and countertransference relationships to integrate the positive aspects of the experience into the Adult ego state for reflection and meaning making (Tudor in Hargaden & Sills, 2003, p216).

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**Dixit' <http://en.libellud.com/games/dixit-8-harmonies>



Claire Bowers, is a 4th year student with RTE Red Kite Training. She has a Diploma in Psychotherapeutic Counselling. As a former early years teacher, parent to young children and trainee psychotherapist she loves combining her love for TA with creative techniques.