EVALUATING THE THERAPEUTIC AND DIAGNOSTIC BENEFITS OF CONFLICT ANALYSIS, A SELF-GUIDED ONLINE THERAPEUTIC ASSESSMENT: AN ONLINE CASE STUDY

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Assessment is a defining component of psychotherapy practice. Unfortunately, it is also a component that can be associated with heightened stigma, dropout, and financial burden. Responding to these concerns, Conflict Analysis (CA) was developed as a meaningful, accessible, and inexpensive online therapeutic assessment that can aid case formulation or function as auxiliary psychoeducation. CA is a client-led psychodynamic assessment that bridges diagnostic frameworks, therapeutic techniques, and technological resources. CA provides a diagnostic blueprint for subsequent interventions for little cost and from the convenience of clients' mobile devices. This study evaluates CA's perceived therapeutic and diagnostic utility through using a single-case research design, featuring the case of 'Laura', a 40-year-old African-American woman, randomly chosen from an online sample cohort. Authors had no direct contact with Laura. The study examines assessment responses, narrative writings, self-reflections, and self-report scores on measures predicting psychopathology, wellbeing, insight, and diagnostic and therapeutic benefits. Measures were evaluated before, immediately after, and two weeks after CA. Data suggest CA offered Laura insight into behavioural patterns and a growth framework. Laura indicated CA helped her balance between competing aspects of identity, and become more engaged, empowered, and open to therapeutic interventions. Findings should not be generalized as the study only presents an individual record.

KEYWORDS: ASSESSMENT, EVALUATION, INNOVATION, INTEGRATIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY, NONINTENSIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY, OUTCOME MEASUREMENT, PROJECTION, PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION

The Internet has transformed how we live, automating processes, eliminating barriers, and spreading information. While these transformations are not always

beneficial, they present an opportunity that clinical communities must take seriously. Towards that end, this paper evaluates utilization of a novel online psychological assessment, addressing to what extent, without clinician involvement, it offers clients opportunities for insight and growth.[1]

Assessment plays a central role in psychotherapy practice (Evans & Finn, 2017). While assessment frequently functions as a catchall for related but distinct initiatives, including DSM-based diagnosis, neuropsychological testing, projective testing, and diagnostic interviews, this paper concentrates on assessments utilized in psychotherapy intake and case formulation. While clinicians continue to utilize interview-based and clinician-rated assessments (Camara, Nathan & Puente, 2000), within North American contexts, for better or worse, there has been a move towards self-report assessment delivery (Bornstein, 2001, 2010; Evans & Finn, 2017), and an increased focus on brief, reliable, and atheoretical assessments (Bornstein, 2010; Piotrowski, 2017).

Although intake assessment is associated with wide-ranging benefits, aiding case conceptualization, risk evaluation, and treatment monitoring (Meyer *et al.*, 2001), it has also been linked with heightened stigma (Nakash, Nagar & Levav, 2015), drop-out (Hilsenroth & Cromer, 2007), and financial burden (Camara, Nathan & Puente, 2000). Conflict Analysis (CA) introduces a theory informed online assessment that responds to these issues, balancing psychometric precision, cost, and time effectiveness (Eisman & Nordal, 2017), and the psychodynamic values of being process focused, client centred, and insight oriented (Bornstein, 2010). CA presents a web-based multi-modal assessment that is interactive and manualized, leveraging technology to promote self-understanding. As a means to evaluate CA's impact, this paper explores its utility as a standalone tool without additional therapeutic services.

CA is adapted from the Conflict Analysis Battery (A.J. Levis, 1988a) and based on the Formal Theory of Behavior (Formal Theory), a model that assesses unconscious dynamics through evaluating conflict resolution patterns (A.J. Levis, 1988a). Shifting away from drive theory (Mitchell, 1993), and the presupposition that the unconscious is oriented toward conflict, CA hypothesizes that the unconscious is oriented towards conflict resolution (A.J. Levis, 1988b). Formal Theory uses two scientific simulations, the pendulum and the two-trayed scale, to exemplify the conflict resolving process. Just as a pendulum ball, when disturbed from balance, necessarily swings back towards, and eventually achieves, energetic equilibrium, Formal Theory argues the mind necessarily shifts towards conflict resolution as a means of offsetting experienced stress. Unlike the pendulum, however, whose motion ceases upon achieving balance, the mind, compelled and inspired by new stressors, begins the process again (A.J. Levis, 1988a). The discrete paths of conflict resolution are best contextualized using Piaget's two-trayed scale (Piaget & Inhelder, 2013). After one tray has been weighted down, there are three formal operations that facilitate its return to balance: reciprocity, which places a weight on the scale's alternate tray; negation, which restores balance by removing the initial weight; and correlation, which restores balance by shifting the scale's fulcrum. Formal Theory uses these conceptual problem-solving approaches to examine psychological stress-response

mechanisms. Reciprocity is recognized as corresponding to interpersonal power dynamics, negation as attitude responses, and correlation as degrees of intensity. This model is called Conflict Analysis because it guides clients to understand conflict-resolving patterns and improve stress-response mechanisms.

CA is a hybrid assessment, integrating the Relational Modality Evaluation Scale (RMES), an interpersonal screening and intensity inventory, and the Metaphor Tasks, a sequence of interactive drawing and writing prompts. Informed by the two-trayed scale, the goal of RMES is to identify relational dichotomies, discerning patterns of dominance versus submissiveness (reciprocity), antagonism versus cooperation (negation), and psychic tension versus wellbeing (correlation). Informed by the pendulum example, Metaphor Tasks illustrate the unfolding of this relational pattern as an evolving syndrome. CA automatically generates a diagnostic record and framework for changes based upon multiple-choice selections, creative responses, and self-reflective writing. Output is presented upon segment conclusion and in the Feedback Profile, a cumulative summary presented upon completion. The Feedback Profile organizes content automatically extracted from clients' responses, grouping it into Insight, Motivation to Change, and Personal Growth templates. Each template encourages reflection on the extracted content, providing space for written reflections. The Feedback Profile, including clients' follow-up reflections, are available for download and forwarding to consulting clinicians.

CA appreciates that creativity depicts personal stress-response mechanisms, representing how individuals uniquely shift from conflict to resolution. For CA, creativity thus functions as a symbolic reference, illustrating the psychic need to resolve conflict. Echoing Jameson's (2013) reading of Freud's concept of wish-fulfilment, CA utilizes creativity to examine this need, guiding clients to cathartically express themselves, and then reflect on self-expression patterns. Paralleling Stiles' Assimilation of Problematic Experiences (APES; Stiles, 2001), CA premises that there is an identifiable sequence leading from dissociation to integration, what CA identifies as conflict to resolution. Like APES, CA guides clients to evaluate behavioural patterns, integrate relevant new information, and develop adaptive modifications. Like APES, CA recognizes that narrative offers a functional mechanism to progress towards these accomplishments (Stiles, Honos-Webb & Lani, 1999). Although these approaches rely on similar process-based models, APES focuses on assessment of specific problems and their degree of assimilation with the goal of 'moving the problem from one level to the next' (Stiles, 2001), while CA targets identification of conflict-resolving dialectics, prioritizing insight about personal stress-response mechanisms (A.J. Levis, 1988b).

While CA methodologically differs from Finn and Tonsager's (1992) Therapeutic Assessment, both recognize assessment can function as a therapeutic experience. To achieve this objective, CA integrates techniques associated with narrative disclosure (Pennebaker, 2000) and psychoeducation (Taylor-Rodgers & Batterham, 2014). In contrast to Rorschach (Exner, 1993), which also addresses creative associations, CA encourages clients to be creative, authoring their own story (Roe & Davidson, 2005), rather than just being interpretative. CA empowers individuals to

extract meaning from their creativity, discern how they resolve conflict, and learn how to improve their behavioural patterns.

Much like Core Conflictual Relational Theme (CCRT; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph,- 1998), CA assesses narratives to evaluate this process. In contrast to CCRT, which requires extensive clinician involvement to detect and interpret clients' patterns (Barber, Foltz & Weinryb, 1998), CA's Metaphor Tasks direct participants to self-analyse their narratives following guided prompts (A.J. Levis, 1988b). Similarly, like the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1996), CA explores networks of relationships and developmental patterns. Whereas AAI explores themes through structured interviews, CA instead uses drawing and writing prompts, encouraging clients to indirectly and creatively address formative patterns. Since CA is self-administered, it limits time necessary for clinicians to deliver and interpret assessments and thus reduces costs. As a multi-modal assessment, CA links assessment approaches, utilizing inventories and creativity tasks to cross-reference each other. This serves to aid self-understanding and strengthens reliability by allowing access to cross-format patterns.

CA's utilization of self-analysis (Horney, 1942) is structured via prompts that directly and indirectly cue insight. While self-analysis can lead to defensive interpretations that 'cover deeper and more threatening meanings'(Myerson, 1960, p. 155), CA argues, following projective methodology (Viglione & Rivera, 2003), that when using indirect reflection mechanisms, defensive responses may have less prominence. CA works, much like AAI, at 'surprising the unconscious' (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996). While one could argue prompts reiterate individuals' pre-established self-schemas (Woolfolk *et al.*, 1995), even when pathogenic self-schemas are presented, CA recognizes these articulations as important therapeutic steps, allowing access to clients' self-understanding and transference dynamics (Kernberg *et al.*, 2008).

CA's self-guided format emphasizes psychoeducational objectives, prioritizing clients' understanding of conflict-resolving patterns, relational dynamics, and change processes. CA's prompts and feedback function as an educational interlocutor. Although this approach shifts out of the bounds of the conventional therapeutic dyad, exiting from the containing framework of a therapeutic relationship, it maintains a mechanism for clients to step outside of themselves and look inward, much like the Gestalt two-chair technique (Greenberg & Higgins, 1980).

Although psychoeducation and psychodynamic approaches differ, there is an increasing precedent of collaboration (Busch & Auchincloss, 2018; McWilliams & Weinberger, 2003). Indeed, although CA diverges from traditional psychodynamic intervention approaches, it maintains certain psychodynamic assessment principles (Bornstein, 2010). Rather than targeting symptom-specific criteria, CA focuses on interpersonal patterns and processes (A.J. Levis, 1988a), linking discrete aspects of clients' identities (Erdelyi, 2006). CA explores the intersection of introspection and active experience through joining a range of assessment typologies (Bornstein, 2010; McClelland *et al.*, 1989), including multiple-choice, narrative, self-reflection, and guided self-analysis.

While the presence of a professional ensures certain ethical protections, moving outside of dyadic encounters may expand the ethical sphere, broadening mental

health support to the ever-growing population in need, including individuals who may not have access to traditional psychotherapy or are homebound. As this process relies on individual engagement and self-directedness, consent is taken very seriously. Before commencing, clients are notified about participation conditions, including potential limits to confidentiality associated with online interfaces. To mitigate risk, clients are provided detailed information, as well as contact information for questions, concerns, and emergency contact information.

CA includes three components: (1) Relational Modality Evaluation Scale (RMES), a 189-item self-report questionnaire, (2) Metaphor Tasks, a series of 10 self-report narrative and drawing exercises, and (3) Feedback Profile, a template that organizes clients' responses, presenting analytical insights based upon a client's profile and self-reflection. Rather than emphasizing personality distinctions or pathology symptoms, CA introduces what is referenced as relational modalities (A.J. Levis, 1988a). Relational modalities are distinct and alternative stress-response mechanisms, presenting contrasting, but not better or worse, ways of responding to conflict that correspond to the formal operations noted above. Whereas personality diagnoses can sometimes constrict individual subjectivity (Block, 2010; Mischel, 1996), referencing stigmatizing labels (Rosenfield, 1997), relational modalities are wellness-based interpersonal and intrapsychic constructs that, like the relational Circumplex model (Wiggins, 1982), focus on relational dichotomies.

RMES subscales include (1) the Dominant Cooperative (DC) Scale, (2) the Dominant Antagonistic (DA) Scale, (3) the Submissive Cooperative (SC) Scale, and (4) the Submissive Antagonistic (SA) Scale. Typically individuals will score highest on a particular relational modality subscale, the scale with the highest score indicating primary relational patterns. RMES includes the Psychic Tension (PT) Scale to evaluate specific areas of intensified conflict. Average RMES completion takes 20 minutes (*M. Levis*, 2017). Previous research (*M. Levis*, 2014) ($n = 471$) suggests RMES subscales have high internal consistency (DC: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$; DA: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$; SC: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$; SA: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.096$; PT: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

Metaphor Tasks integrate projective (Cohen, Swerdlik & Phillips, 1996), narrative (McLeod, 1997), exposure (Sloan *et al*., 2018), and self-reflection (Williams, 2010) methods. Tasks begin with open-ended prompts, allowing clients to broach topics that might otherwise be difficult to address. Tasks become progressively more targeted, concluding with essay questions addressing conflictual issues, how conflicts have been resolved, potential for changes, and relevance. On average, each task takes 20 minutes (*M. Levis*, 2017).

Metaphor Tasks follow the premise that the degree to which an individual feels stressed corresponds to the degree that an individual responds to offset the initial stress. While the experience of stress is passive, as one is subjected to a given stressor, the responsive action is active, as it requires personal initiative (A.J. Levis, 1988a). Each passive/active dialectic presents an illustration of one's conflict resolution pattern, charting the unique ways the person engages stress. Metaphor

Tasks include three passive/active dialectics (stress/response, anxiety/defence, reversal/compromise). Each stage is associated with specific Metaphor Tasks.

Prior studies (Levis & Levis, 2020) indicate clients typically complete full-format CA in less than 3.5 hours and that at least 74.5% of clients rated the experience as diagnostically and therapeutically beneficial. Based on a previous randomized control study comparing CA with online mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) and narrative (Pennebaker, 2000) interventions (*M. Levis*, 2017), completion rates were found to be similar between interventions, but CA clients (n = 96) reported significantly more therapeutic value over time.

Although CA's feasibility has been previously addressed (Levis & Levis, 2020), little has showcased client experience. Towards that end, this paper documents the record of a client, 'Laura', who responded to a posting about web-based psychoeducation and self-analysis and provided informed consent that her anonymized record could be used for research and publication. This case was randomly chosen from a sample of 50 online cases.

The paper deconstructs CA's process, reviews Laura's responses and self-analysis, and documents implementation and potential benefits. It does not, however, engage in extended case analysis, allowing readers to encounter Laura's own self-discovery. Although this paper is unique in exploring an online case, it fits within a legacy of single-case-study research (Messer, 2007). While other designs may offer greater statistical accuracy, this design was selected to highlight client experience.

METHODS

This paper presents Laura's record, including RMES scores, Metaphor Tasks, and Feedback Profile. As no direct communication between authors and Laura occurred, the paper focuses on Laura's self-analysis. Metaphor Tasks are grouped as dialectical sequences (stress/response, anxiety/ defence, and reversal/compromise). Before starting CA (baseline) and after completion of CA (post), Laura completed the *International Short-Form Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (I-PANAS-SF; Thompson, 2007), and the Beck Cognitive Insight Scale (BCIS; Beck *et al.*, 2004), as well as the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems Short Circumplex Form (IIP-SC; Soldz *et al.*, 1995). She was allocated three days to complete CA. Two weeks later (follow-up), Laura again completed the I-PANAS-SF and BCIS. Laura also completed the Intervention Outcome Query Full Version (IOQF) at post and follow-up. Laura was provided with contact information for questions, concerns, and emergencies.

Patient

Laura is a 40-year-old African-American woman who responded to an online posting about web-based psychoeducation. She is married, finished an Associate's degree (Diploma of Higher Education), earns between $30,000 and $60,000 annually – an income range associated with median annual earnings (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), and addressed family and relationship issues as primary

areas of conflict. Laura completed the analysis within 14 hours after initial login and spent four hours actively working on CA.

Measures

Measures were selected based on reliability, validity, and psychotherapy outcome relevance. An Institutional Review Board approved measures and research protocol.

IIP-SC (Soldz *et al*., 1995) is a brief self-report interpersonal Circumplex, focusing on problematic behaviour. The 32 items identify interpersonal problems using the following subscales: Domineering (PA, Cronbach's α = 0.69), Vindictive (BC, Cronbach's α = 0.71), Cold (DE, Cronbach's α = 0.84), Socially Avoidant (FG, Cronbach's α = 0.80), Nonassertive (HI, Cronbach's α = 0.75), Exploitable (JK, Cronbach's α = 0.74), Overly Nurturing (LM, Cronbach's α = 0.71), and Intrusive (NO, Cronbach's α = 0.80) (Soldz *et al*., 1995). Items utilize five-point Likert scales, ranging from 'not at all' to 'extremely'.

I-PANAS-SF (Thompson, 2007) is a brief culture-informed positive and negative affect measurement (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). I-PANAS-SF includes two five-item factors: Positive Affect (Cronbach's α = 0.78) and Negative Affect (Cronbach's α = 0.76) (Thompson, 2007). Items utilize five-point Likert scales, ranging from 'never agree' to 'always agree'.

BCIS (Beck *et al*., 2004) is a self-report cognitive insight measurement that includes the nine-item Self-Reflectiveness Scale (Cronbach's α = 0.68) and six-item Self-Certainty Scale (Cronbach's α = 0.60). Items utilize four-point Likert scales, ranging from 'do not agree at all' to 'agree completely' (Beck *et al*., 2004). Despite BCIS' relatively low Cronbach's α, it is widely used globally (Van Camp, Sabbe & Oldenburg, 2017).

IOQF is an exploratory self-report perceived therapeutic and diagnostic benefits measurement. IOQF includes 21 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', and three differentiated scaled items, addressing financial value of program (free to $100), desire to repeat program, and perceived relational modality. Perceived therapeutic benefit and diagnostic benefit scores were tallied by calculating weighted mean of associated items. Personal value items were non-numeric and evaluated independently. Items are listed in Online Supplement Table 1.

RESULTS

RMES

Laura's RMES scores identify her as having a Dominant Cooperative profile with elevated Dominant Antagonistic and Submissive Cooperative scores. In contrast, her Submissive Antagonistic and Psychic Tension scores are both considerably lower. This profile suggests Laura is comfortable exerting control and leadership, but that she also has supportive qualities and low psychopathology. IIP-SC scores were highest on Cold and Socially Avoidant scales and slightly elevated on Overly

Nurturant and Intrusive scales. RMES scores, in contrast to IIP-SC scores, illustrate dominance as a more important, and causal factor, than coldness and emotional distance. Table 1 presents scores.

Metaphor Tasks

Metaphor Tasks document clients' syndromal profiles, tracing conflict-resolving patterns. This paper highlights Laura's profile by presenting her responses to each stage's tasks, as follows. Drawings are presented in Online Supplement Figure 1.

Stress

The stress stage, the point of initial conflict, is presented via three Conflictual Memory Tasks and the Family Balloon Task. Highlighting the aetiology of conflictual patterns, these tasks evaluate behavioural patterns through various projective angles. Conflictual Memories Tasks request clients draw and reflect on significant conflicts

Table 1: *Laura's Scores*

Scale (score range)	Baseline mean	Post mean	Follow-up mean
RMES (1–6)			
Dominant Cooperative	2.63		
Dominant Antagonistic	2.11		
Submissive Cooperative	2.16		
Submissive Antagonistic	1.28		
Psychic Tension	1.15		
IIP-SC (1–5)			
Domineering	1.25		
Vindictive	1		
Cold	2.50		
Socially Avoidant	2		
Nonassertive	1		
Exploitable	1		
Overly Nurturant	1.50		
Intrusive	1.50		
I-PANAS-SF (1–5)			
Positive Affect	4.6	4.8	4.4
Negative Affect	1	1	1
BCIS (1–4)			
Self-Reflection	2	2.89	3.13
Self-Certainty	2.92	2.4	2
PGIS (1–6)	5.89	6	5.89

from different life stages; the Balloon Metaphor Task requests clients draw balloons that map their social system.

Childhood Conflictual Memory Task   Laura used this task to explore her troubled relationship with her father, recalling how as a child she once had failed to wake her father up for work and how he, upon waking, realized that he was late and 'grabbed a baseball bat and beat me with it'. She cites this was the second time her father, who she identifies as 'the most important person to me', had broken her arm. In addressing what remains unresolved, she writes 'forgiveness for his actions' and 'not allowing myself to feel powerless and scared'. Laura emphasizes difficulty forgiving her father, but also blames herself for being a victim.

Adolescent Conflictual Memory Task   Laura recalled how at 16 she became pregnant 'and was not allowed to have an abortion'. She addressed that 'I created the conflict by getting pregnant and also by listening to my dad who I was still frightened of'. Laura identifies that this experience 'caused me to live an inauthentic life for 20 years'. She notes that over time she has become herself again and is 'much happier now'.

Recent Conflictual Memory Task   This vignette presents an argument between Laura and her daughter in which her daughter is 'upset because she felt there were some things that I did not do for her'. She identifies that her share of the conflict was 'raising her to be very spoiled'. Laura classifies herself as a victim, being taken advantage of by her daughter, and a victimizer, guilty for raising a spoiled daughter. The intensity of this conflict 'created a wedge' such that they subsequently severed communication.

Family Balloon Task   Laura presents her family's four generations as five balloons with no strings. The balloons are organized neatly in two columns, separated by gender, with one additional balloon in between on top, corresponding to her 'kind, sensitive, and trusting' 67-year-old mother. Left-side balloons present Laura's 'ungrateful, envious, and spiteful' 24-year-old daughter, and her 'funny, caring, and brilliant' 2-year-old granddaughter. Right-side balloons present Laura's 'compassionate, giving, and friendly' 34-year-old brother, and her 'cold, generous, and arrogant' 35-year old husband. Laura shares their dialogue:

> Daughter: 'People wish they were me. I have two jobs and make more than anyone else my age'. Brother: 'Why are you worried about what other people have? Life isn't about acquiring things, it's about forming relationships and helping others'. Husband: 'How can you help others without money … other people won't help you when you need it'. Mother: 'I wish you would all stop arguing. God made all of us to be helpmates'.

While Laura's mother and brother appear wholesome and loving, her husband and daughter emerge as manipulative and materialistic. Reflecting on what changes

could be made, Laura notes 'people should realize that not everyone has the same goals in life … and they should stop trying to force their views on other people'. Sympathetic to the downtrodden, Laura critically judges her family's values. Relationally, Laura's dominance makes her uncomfortable being dominated, a dynamic that typifies her conflict with her daughter and husband. Rather than voicing this sentiment, Laura silently projects her moral superiority.

Response

The second stage in CA's six-part dialectic, Response, presents reactions to initial stress. Whereas the first stage presents passivity (i.e., a certain stressor has acted on the person), in this stage the person actively responds. Response is illustrated by the Relationship Balloon Task and Mask Metaphor Series.

Relationship Balloon Task   While the prior task portrayed Laura's family of origin, this task addresses her marital family. Laura drew balloons aligned triangularly; Laura and her husband above, Laura's daughter positioned centrally below. While Laura is yellow, the others are identically green. Laura classifies her husband as 'aloof', her daughter as 'stubborn', and herself as 'caring'. Their dialogue follows:

> Husband: 'You're not making enough at your job. You have to care about yourself and your paycheck first'. Laura: 'I am happy at my job and I love what I do. I am happy with my life. I'm not going to quit to make more money and be miserable'. Daughter: 'Well, I have two jobs, and I'm starting a part-time business next year. I'll be happy making money'.

Laura feels alienated, caught between her daughter and husband's alliance. Recalling the previous task, Laura suggests resolving the conflict by not forcing her 'opinions on anyone else. If they believe that money makes them happy, then let them believe that'. Rather than engage with conflict, Laura avoids confrontation, holding back criticism.

Mask Metaphor Task   This task asks clients to draw a mask and explore feelings that the mask conveys. Laura's mask, a wispy line drawing, shows a face with few features other than two curved lines that circle up towards the eyes. She states mask presents 'pain, frustration, silent suffering'. She indicates the 'conflicts are not being able to be myself at all time, having to hide portions of myself from people, having to adjust my dreams to fit inside my new reality, and not being able to harmonize who I am, with who I should be'. Laura explains the mask 'represents thinking that the only resolution is screaming out in frustration … It represents me finding a solution that makes all the aspects of my life fit together'. Intriguingly, this response exposes the dynamic of previous exchanges. Rather than expressing rage, Laura hides behind supportive masks, allowing others to continue to abuse her.

Anxiety

The third stage, Anxiety, explores hidden feelings, as presented by the Transparent Mask and What Is in the Heart Tasks. While the mask portrays a protective exterior, typically what is inside reveals sensitive unresolved tensions. Within CA's dialectic, the Anxiety stage parallels the Stress stage's passivity.

Transparent Mask Task   This task requests clients look at feelings hidden behind previous exercise's mask. Laura explains that her translucent multicolour drawing 'conveys some rage, disappointment, frustration, happiness, guilt, helplessness, confusion, compassion and hope'. She writes:

> The conflicts are the rage I have for spending so many years doing something I hated, rage from not being able to pursue my dreams, and guilt for having those feelings. Confusion about what happens next, compassion for myself and the people who brought these problems into my life, frustration at not knowing how to solve this, and hope that I will find a way that makes me truly happy.

What is in the Heart Task   This task probes deeper into clients' emotional reality. Laura looks past her anguish and writes about love, describing how the heart 'represents the love I feel for myself, my family, and people in the world'. She continues, 'It represents the everlasting hope that is in everything I do, and in everything I see. And it represents the conflict between who I truly am and the way I had to live all these years'. Love is a foundational value that provides Laura the strength to see things positively and persevere.

Laura traces her mask sequence as, beginning 'with emotional confusion', followed by the 'kaleidoscope of emotions behind the mask, jumbled together and fighting for dominance', which 'transforms into my heart filled with love and hope'. Through this sequence, Laura allows what has hidden to come forth, permitting her repressed sense of care – the child eagerly trying to wake her father –to become manifest. Rather than feeling powerless or angry, she rediscovers love. Laura realizes that she has power to shift how she approaches the world, and how others approach her, through opening her 'heart up more', and letting 'words come from my heart instead of my head'. She explains that she 'can reduce the intensity of conflicts by always keeping in mind that the other person is not my enemy. They are people I love dearly'.

Defense

The fourth stage, Defense, reflects a responsive action to mitigate previous anxiety. It utilizes: (1) the Animal Metaphor Task, which requests clients draw two animals, write a story, and reflect on how the story pertains to their life; and (2) the Fairy Tale Task, which asks clients to write and illustrate a fairy tale, and explore its relevance.

Animal Metaphor Task   In this exercise, Laura wrote about a 50-year-old male lion that is 'majestic, confident, strong' and a female three-year-old dog, that is 'loving, outgoing, playful'. In her drawing, the Lion is larger and is positioned on top of the diminutive dog. The animals' conversation follows:

> Lion: 'Today was tough. I just want to relax and get a massage and not worry about anything for the next hour'. Dog: 'My day wasn't that difficult. I played a lot, ran around, and had a lot of fun'. Lion: 'Sounds quite boring. How can you run around the house all day long when there is a huge world to explore?'… Dog: 'I like looking at the world through the window. I don't want to explore'… Lion: 'They trained you well. I'll never be trained or tamed'.

Laura recognizes herself, claiming:

> I identify with the lion. I want to travel and roam around every day … I want to meet new people, see new things … I want to live outside, sleep on the ground …

Despite being a more powerful creature, the Lion feels hemmed in and oppressed by the dog. Laura at first identifies her sentiment of feeling 'boxed in' with becoming pregnant, but later recognizes that this is a broader life pattern. She writes:

> It's how I've always felt but particularly when I got pregnant. I told my parents what I wanted to do in life. And I was forced to choose the boring, sedentary life. And it was horrible, and I felt stuck. And I am now acknowledging the person I really am.

Recognizing this pattern, she writes:

> I get into relationships with people who want to stop me from living the life I want to live. I relate to people who tell me no, just live a normal life without adventure or excitement. So I get myself into trouble because I feel stuck.

Laura appreciates that this is particularly relevant to her marriage, claiming, 'My husband wants me to settle down into a good job instead of traveling the world'. In contrast to the Mask sequence where she wrote, 'the other person is not my enemy', here Laura exclaims 'I'm willing to stop having relationships with people who say no to me, people that want to box me in. I'm willing to stop letting people bog me down with obligations'. Rather than being emotionally open, Laura's demonstrates defensive tactic of cutting people off.

Fairy Tale Task   In this task, Laura drew a woman with long dark hair and a small unhappy man. The woman, Snow White, is 'kind, caring, naïve'. The man, Grumpy, one of the seven dwarves, is 'irritable, honest, protective'. Replicating her Animal Metaphor, Laura tells how Snow White 'wanted to live in this castle with a handsome prince but it's hard work, and it's boring'. Snow White continues 'Everyday it's a circle for me. I do the same things over and over again. I want to help but I

want to travel through the kingdom'. Grumpy, tries to calm her, instructing 'There's nothing out there but highway robbers, thieves, and liars. You are safer here'. Unmoved, Snow White rejoins, 'I don't want to be safe. I want to have the happily ever after that I was promised. Right now it's normally ever after'.

Laura recognizes she has qualities of Snow White and Grumpy. While Snow White presents her zeal for life, Grumpy expresses her jadedness, her recognition that 'there is nothing I can do, so I close myself off again'. Laura recognizes that:

> People depend on me for a lot of things. And sometimes it makes me feel stuck. When it should make me feel appreciated and loved. Because so many people think so highly of me … I relate to them by feeling resentful because they are taking up too much of my time. I set myself up for trouble by having a negative attitude towards them and their requests.

In contrast to her desire to write off those that inhibit her, Laura sees the challenge of overcoming her judgmental response pattern, stating:

> I am willing to become grateful … I am willing to change my mind and focus on the benefits I gain in these situations, instead of what is being subtracted from my life.

Reversal

The fifth stage, Reversal, is associated with the defensive action's failings. The Intensified Animal Metaphor corresponds with a passivity state, in which clients reencounter previous stressors.

Intensified Metaphor Task   Reiterating the previous animal drama, Laura presents a 34-year-old male lion, who is 'dominating, combative, controlling', and a 6-year-old female rabbit, who is 'shy, afraid, submissive'. Much like the previous dialogue, the Lion is large and positioned directly above the rabbit. Their story is as follows:

> Lion: 'Give me a reason why I shouldn't eat you right now?' Rabbit: I can run faster than you'. Lion: 'You can try. But the fear will paralyze you before you can take a few steps. Then I'll devour you alive'. Rabbit: 'I can show you where lots of tasty food is at'. Lion: 'Ah … a coward and a traitor. You would give up entire families to save your own skin? Other rabbits without mothers or fathers. Little babies that I will eat. Don't you care about them?' Rabbit: 'I care about myself more'. Lion: 'Then lead the way little one. But let's start with your family first'.

The lion, the character that Laura identifies with, is presented as having a morally higher stature than the rabbit. Laura describes this dichotomy, as 'The rabbit is willing to sell out everyone in order to save herself. She doesn't care about the world or the other animals in it'. In contrast, 'The lion is considered a predator by the world … even though he kills for food, he would never sell out his friends and family'.

Laura writes, 'The rabbit needs to become a better rabbit. The rabbit doesn't have to sacrifice herself, but she should think of other options. The lion needs to eat less animals'. Although Laura subjects the rabbit to a greater degree of criticism than the lion, she urges the lion to be more moderate, recognizing that her dominant stance polarizes circumstances.

Compromise

The final active stage, Compromise, reflects growth achievement, and, typically, reconciles the Stress stage's conflicts. It is presented through the Short Story, a task that requests clients to write and illustrate a short story.

Short Story   Laura's short story recounts adventures of Cyan, a 13-year-old girl, who is 'bratty, mean, naïve' and Flugher, a 78-year-old man who is 'dishonest, greedy, conniving'. Cyan travelled two hours each way to get to market every week, something she hated doing. One day, while en route to market, she was pickpocketed by Flugher. After finally catching him and knocking him down:

> Cyan felt compassion and got on her knees to see what was wrong. As she did, Flugher hit her in the face, grabbed the bag and took off running again. Cyan was too exhausted to run after him. She beat her hands in the dirt, until she realized … she would not have to wait 5 hours in the market today. Happy at the thought Cyan got up whistling.

Tying this conflict to her incipient childhood stress,[2] Laura identifies herself with Cyan and Flugher with her father. Like Snow White, Cyan dreams of adventure. The outside world, however, is, as Grumpy foretold, the world of 'highway robbers, thieves and liars'. Cyan, like Laura, is taken advantage of by this cruel world. Unlike her other characters, however, Cyan remains positive, grateful for misadventure alongside the adventure. Looking critically at herself, Laura recognizes that:

> I set myself up by not paying attention to things around me. I live in my head, thinking about what life is going to be like. And what I want to do. Without taking the time to see the present. So I relate to people on a superficial level because I'm never really present.

Feedback Profile

Upon Metaphor Task completion, clients review the Feedback Profile, a template that organizes key conflicts, resolutions, and potential areas of growth that were identified in RMES and Metaphor Tasks (Online Supplement Table 2 presents Laura's response). Summarizing what she learned through this process, Laura wrote:

> I learned that I gravitate towards people who stifle me. That maybe because of how I was raised, I look for people who do the same things my father did to me. So I want to have freedom, I want to explore yet the people close to me

keep me grounded. Which isn't a good thing. So I've been feeling frustrated because I did not understand that I was choosing these people. And now things make sense to me. Like whenever I had an unusual idea, the people whose opinions matter the most to me always say something that brings me crashing to reality. And now I understand why, and how I need to handle it. You know I've been trying to live a frustration free life, and this is a huge part of the frustration.

Integrating aspects of CA into her life, and recognizing her own personal pattern of resolving conflict, Laura describes:

My patterns are finding people who box me in, thinking about things that frustrate me in a negative way, always looking for excitement without realizing I can find it anywhere, and setting myself up for failure with my attitude towards things. My stress-response is to get frustrated, and suffer in silence. The stress comes from me not being myself, having to hide and lie to people. My anxiety is all the emotions I am feeling and not being able to harmonize them within myself…

Laura looks forward to:

change the way I think about things, so there is less conflict. I want to see more of the benefits instead of the negatives. I want to be authentic, opening up more and responding from my heart instead of my brain. I want to use my heart as my strength.

Recognizing that her 'relational modality is Dominant Cooperative', Laura hopes to utilize her strength to express love rather than criticism, to be engaged rather than being silently hostile, to 'adjust' rather than run away.

Outcome Measures: Post and Follow-up Results

Immediately after CA and two weeks after CA, Laura completed post and follow-up, finishing in 45 and 49 minutes, respectively. When comparing changes between baseline and post, outcome measures show improvements in most areas (see Table 1 for scores). Positive Affect scores increased from 4.6 to 4.8, while Self-Reflectiveness scores increased from 2 to 2.89, an 18% improvement, and Self-Certainty scores decreased from 2.92 to 2.4, showing an 18% improvement in openness to others' ideas. Between post and follow-up, scores varied. While Positive Affect mean scores declined to 4.4, Self-Reflectiveness score increased to 3.12, a 56% improvement from baseline. Self-Certainty declined to 2, a 35% improvement from baseline. Negative Affect remained at 1 at all time points, the lowest possible score.

Laura's IOQF scores demonstrate a high level of satisfaction with CA. At post and follow-up, Laura's scores show near perfect reliability. Mean perceived diagnostic benefit scores at post and follow-up were 4.89, while mean perceived therapeutic value scores were 4.92 at post and 4.75 at follow-up. Regarding financial value, Laura rated CA at $100, the maximum value, at both time points. She

identified that she would want to recomplete CA in one month at both time points. Laura also noted her self-perceived relational diagnosis matched RMES' diagnosis at both time points. In regard to perceived diagnostic benefit, Laura selected 'strongly agree' for all items at both time points except for, 'This program helped me identify how to better manage power', for which she selected 'agree'. For perceived therapeutic benefit, at post she rated all items as 'strongly agree' except for, 'This program was an emotional experience' for which she selected 'agree'. At follow-up, she rated all items as 'strongly agree' except for, 'This program was an emotional experience', 'I think that this survey would be useful for high school students', and 'The program offered me both diagnostic and therapeutic information about myself', which she rated as 'agree'. Online Supplement Table 1 presents IOQF scoring.

TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS

RMES results present Laura as having elevated Dominant Cooperative scores with slightly raised Dominant Antagonism and Submissive Cooperative scores. This spectrum contrasts with IIP-SC results, which detected prominent Cold and Socially Avoidant scores (criterion allied with Dominant Antagonistic patterns) and slightly raised Overly Nurturant and Intrusive scales (criterion allied with Dominant Cooperative patterns). While there is near congruence between these results, RMES ranks Laura as more cooperative, whereas IIP-SC emphasizes her antagonism. Although Laura expresses antagonistic qualities, these appear secondary in RMES and Metaphor Tasks. Moreover, at post and follow-up, Laura identified as having a Dominant Cooperative pattern, strongly agreed that 'the program was diagnostic', and rated the diagnostic value of CA at 4.89 out of 5. Laura's Metaphor Tasks contextualize her relational pattern, allowing recognition of her leadership ability, capacity to be a lion, Cyan, or Snow White, but also her care for others and desire to be loved. We note feelings of rage and anger at her father's violent misdemeanours, her unwanted pregnancy, and her daughter and husband's slights. We also perceive her guilt, like the rabbit leading the lion to devour her family. Over the course of CA, as she learns more about herself, Laura moderates these feelings. Upon concluding her Short Story, Laura emerges as more comfortable handling adversity, finding satisfaction even in suffering.

Whereas earlier in her Metaphor Tasks, Laura antagonistically placed blame on others – 'I'm willing to stop having relationships with people who say no to me, people that want to box me in' – she comes to recognize that 'the stress comes from me not being myself, having to hide and lie to people' and that 'I created my own prison using well-meaning friends and family'. Rather than running away, she declares, 'I am willing to be more present, instead of being inside my head. I am willing to try to relate to people on a deeper level'. Laura concludes stating, 'I want to be authentic, opening up more and responding from my heart instead of my brain. I want to use my heart as my strength'.

This comparison of head versus heart, calculation versus love, reappears throughout. Tracing back to her childhood, Laura describes her father's abuses as leading to

doubts about how to express herself. These violent lessons seem to have constrained Laura, leading her to hold herself back. In a similar way, Laura privileged her daughter over herself, recognizing her 'role as a mother had to come first'. This prioritization led Laura to suppress her own feelings, locking her into duty and expectation, in which, like in the rabbit and lion story, survival is dependent on betrayal. Cyan's story rests in juxtaposition to this orientation, and more directly, in opposition to Laura's Childhood Memory. This contrast showcases the respective states of passivity, being abused, and activity, forgiving, and finding joy. CA helps Laura balance between competing parts of her identity and recognize how to overcome feeling manipulated and tendencies to run away from relationships.

Through CA, Laura discerns a vocabulary to un-'box' herself. While one could read her responses as merely replicating a pattern of compliance, Laura's writings argue the opposite, identifying that CA helped her see her 'own prison' and begin the process of exiting out from its walls. Upon completion of CA, she writes on this point:

> it (CA) has helped me clearly see how I am keeping myself locked in place, by choosing people who keep me in place … And I need to start listening to my family members who believe I can do everything.

She notes further, 'My stress-response is to get frustrated, and suffer in silence'. CA helps break this silence, allowing Laura increased ability to voice her suffering, guiding her to better assert her needs while shifting towards a more moderate relational stance that allows more compassion for herself, partner, and daughter. Intriguingly, the absence of a clinician, or for that matter any person of authority, may perhaps provide Laura space to confront her experiences. CA's self-guided orientation appears to offer a liberating void, a protected space for Laura to engage herself.

Formal Theory conceptualizes that insight is achieved through gaining awareness about one's personal patterns, contextualizing lived experiences in a dialectic of resolving conflict (A.J. Levis, 1988a). CA offers a pragmatic framework that may aid self-reflection and scaffold potential changes. A hypothetical clinician, upon reviewing this record, would be informed about Laura's relational conflicts and patterns of compliance and avoidance before beginning in-person treatment. This clinician could accordingly tailor the psychotherapeutic encounter to help Laura further 'unbox' herself, gain personal mastery, and improve family relationships. This clinician could leverage CA output to improve counter transference dynamics and could also potentially pursue tailored interventions, such as a couples-based counselling to address relational conflict patterns.

Laura's case presents an intricate and dramatic portrait. While this portrait is a useful tool for Laura, and potentially for her hypothetical clinician, it is, nonetheless, a self-portrait and thus constrained by self-report limitations (Lilienfeld & Fowler, 2006). CA's indirect format and integration of various types of self-report measures may help mitigate some concerns. Laura's repeated Metaphor Tasks dialectically step towards diagnostic accuracy, allowing entry into her symbolic universe. Borrowing from Freud, this path 'awakens in the creative writer a memory of

an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work' (Freud, 1959, p. 150). Just as Laura is able to traverse this narrative, we too can follow her journey, the clinician here being less an investigator and more an interpreter, chronicling Laura's conflict resolution process. While this boundary presents a natural limitation of CA, it also acts as its strength, empowering clients to independently gain self-understanding.

This paper does not mean to suggest that CA overwrites traditional clinical approaches. Rather, especially now in our moment of social distancing and increased levels of stress and uncertainty, we hope that CA opens doors to individuals beginning the therapeutic process, allowing them a means to start the journey. Although it may be argued that not all clients would engage as assiduously or derive comparable insight, Laura's response ratings are typical of others in her sample cohort. Of these individuals, more than 92% agreed or strongly agreed that CA was informative and 83% agreed or strongly agreed that it helped them understand their personality (*M. Levis*, 2017). Although established outcome measures did not provide the clearest evidence, BCIS suggests that Laura gained considerable insight over time. Similarly, both IOQF's therapeutic and diagnostic scores reflect Laura's positive estimation of CA and its personal relevance for her. Recalling Shedler's (2010) discussion about insight's enduring value, it makes sense that CA, as an insight-oriented assessment, could offer lasting benefits.

CA anticipates Internet access and basic computer dexterity. Implications include broadening therapeutic services, expediting therapeutic achievement, and reducing service costs. Regarding outcome measures, although there was improvement on all scales, gains were modest. Given CA's brevity, however, and absence of professional involvement, gains remain impactful.

As Laura was not actively seeking clinical services, and her psychopathology levels were low, there is likely a floor/ceiling effect (Seligman, 1995), limiting her potential achievement. It remains difficult to evaluate if identified changes are beneficial or are risk factors for continued relational conflict. The authors are hesitant to suggest Laura should seek reconciliation with her father and placidly acquiesce to her partner and daughter's demands. The authors' only contact with Laura was through protocol and follow-up measures. As such, authors do not know whether CA motivated additional psychological services, nor do we know if CA led to enduring behavioural changes. It is important to emphasize that gaining insight and achieving therapeutic change, although related, are not the same thing. Allusions to Laura's hypothetical clinician, and how he/she might act, are solely to illustrate how CA could be used in clinical practice. Future studies will gauge the benefits of CA in greater depth, including evaluations of whether CA motivates commencing psychotherapy, its utility as a decision aid for those already seeking services, and how it impacts clients with specific diagnoses. Future studies will also evaluate longer-term follow-up to better evaluate enduring impact. Laura's CA record evidences certain therapeutic benefits even without clinicians' involvement. Having a clinician interpret these patterns would likely strengthen benefits.

NOTES

1. An online appendix includes the assessment schedule, patient written responses, drawings, and feedback reflections.
2. Links between Conflictual Memories and Short Story were not instructed by CA. It is a common association, however, supporting CA's role mapping conflict resolution process.

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