

Prelicensees' Corner

Psychotherapy: A Mystery Puzzle in Progress

by: Jaelline Jaffe, PhD

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Mysteries

When I was a kid, I loved the mystery section in the children's room at the old library. I would start at one end of a shelf and go through books until I finished one author, and then start on another. As an adult, I am in the car many hours each week, which is my only time for fiction "reading," via books that have been recorded. When I have a good story on tape or CD, the long Los Angeles commute becomes not only bearable but even something to anticipate: what will happen next? I listen to murder mysteries, but also to other intrigues, such as *The Da Vinci Code*; or any Barbara Kingsolver book in which several separate, seemingly unrelated stories come together; or any John Irving story, so well-crafted and full of human mystery; or John Grisham, who creates complex legal dramas that are frightening, because while they probably did not happen as written, they certainly could have.

Jigsaw puzzles

In my aunt's house, there was always a puzzle table set up in the corner. Visitors or family members walking past the table would stop for a minute that often stretched into an hour to find just the right piece for that spot over there in the middle of the sky or grass, or to find the place where this funny shaped eye might fit. When I bought my house, it had to have room for a puzzle table in one corner, so a work in progress did not have to be put under the couch in order to eat at the dining room table. Every year for winter holidays, I open a new murder mystery jigsaw puzzle-the kind where the picture on the cover bears no resemblance to the actual puzzle, and the completed puzzle contains clues to solve the mystery in the little story booklet that is enclosed in the same box. There is great satisfaction in assembling a puzzle, and then usually taking it apart and putting it back in the box, to give away to another puzzle fiend.

Some key elements of puzzles are:

- the whole picture is never presented in one piece.
- the pieces have to fit together to make sense.
- in mystery puzzles, the picture evolves without a template to copy.
- some pieces look like they can go here, but they could also go there.
- the subtleties of color and shape help determine how pieces fit.
- sometimes the puzzle solver puts pieces in the wrong place and then tries to make things fit into his or her version of the picture.
- putting the border together first helps frame the picture.
- sorting pieces by color or shape can help with finding what goes where.

- sometimes you have to walk away and return later in order to see what was right there all along.

Some key elements of mysteries are:

- a good mystery keeps the reader guessing, and often misleads by pointing to the wrong suspects.
- the story unfolds over time, and not necessarily in an order that the reader could anticipate.
- there is often a deep secret that underlies the motivation and behavior of protagonists.
- parts of the story seem unrelated to the others, but eventually the pieces come together.
- sometimes a casual word or image forecasts something important that will be revealed later.
- each person interviewed by the detective has a different part of the story.
- each version of the story is different from the others, and often in contradiction.
- suspects in murder cases lie to protect themselves, and then lie again to cover up other lies.
- some characters lie to protect-or to incriminate-other characters.
- characters sometimes do not intend to lie, but make their own guesses and suppositions that are presented as truth.
- direct questioning of the suspect by the detective will sometimes give a guilty person cues to the direction the interrogation is heading, which allows for further fabrication.
- sneaky questioning will sometimes catch a person off-guard and will uncover contradictions in the suspect's story.

What Does This Have to Do With Therapy?

Therapy is often very much like a mystery, or a jigsaw puzzle. I have found that the "murder mystery metaphor" is useful in helping trainees and interns in supervision. Here are some mystery clues, with case examples to illustrate.

Parts of the Whole

Just as in a mystery or a puzzle, every person presents one version of the whole story. That version may be directly or unintentionally distorted, for any number of reasons (self protection, limited perspective, anger at another person, etc.). A trainee will often take one version of a story to be true and accurate, without cross-checking with other people involved or even wondering if the information is complete.

- One trainee was working with a student who had many behavior problems in class. After a few sessions, the child reported that he was doing much better, so the trainee was preparing to terminate his case without additional input. When it was suggested that she get input, she went to ask the PE teacher, who confirmed that the boy was doing well, and again the trainee was prepared to close the case. Meanwhile, the student was sitting in the detention area after school for several days! When she finally contacted his academic teachers, she found that his grades had continued to decline and his classroom behavior, while somewhat improved, still left a lot to be desired.
- An intern who was working with an unhappy wife mentioned in supervision that she felt the husband really was a despicable character. But she had never met the husband, and only had the wife's version upon which her assessment was based. When she later had a conjoint session, she could see how the wife needed her husband and almost incited his objectionable behavior.

- A child complaining about overly restrictive, mean parents was told by the trainee that her parents were right to set limitations to protect the children. What the trainee did not consider was asking for more detailed information on the type of restrictions, and the kind of discipline implied by "mean" in the description.

Forcing Pieces to Fit

Here is where countertransference jumps up to bite us in the behind! Let's face it... most people become interested in our profession while sorting out their own family or personal issues. While our life experiences can help us become sensitive and capable therapists, if we are not actively attending to our own issues, they can also get in the way. This phenomenon often shows up in training as the puzzle pieces that a supervisee either overlooks or misinterprets.

- One teenager described bringing vodka to school in small film canisters and drinking almost daily under the bleachers during nutrition break. The trainee, who was raised in an alcoholic family system, did not recognize this behavior as unusual or dangerous, and didn't mention it for several weeks in supervision.
- A sexually active adolescent was concerned she might be pregnant. The intern did not help the girl think through her options, but instead tried to get her to reconsider abortion by assuring her that she would regret it years later-her own personal experience.
- A trainee, who had a boyfriend stalker, was so sensitized to anything that hinted of this possibility, that she often made remarks to girls about being suspicious of their boyfriends.

Overlooking Subtle Clues or Inattention to Details

Small details in a mystery, or pieces of information that seem unrelated when first mentioned, usually find their way into the unveiling of "who done it." Also, small details may become big matters when overlooked. In therapy sessions, unfortunately, there may be considerable information that is NOT helpful or directly related to dealing with the client's difficulties, or other information that IS pertinent but overlooked by the therapist. The challenge becomes paying close attention to details and noting small bits of information that may later reveal a hidden pattern or an important facet in understanding a client.

- A trainee took an intake call and noted the presenting problem was "depression." When the client arrived and completed the standard forms, the trainee did not carefully review them and thought she understood the issue as stated on the phone. In the last few minutes of the session, the client expressed concerns about her ongoing fantasies of killing her parents in their sleep-which was actually noted on intake that had gone unread.
- A girl's comments about her stresses and difficulties were taken as ordinary adolescent angst by the trainee. However, late on a Friday afternoon of a holiday weekend, she began adding up some of the remarks that had been made and suddenly worried that the girl might be in danger. It took some fancy footwork to track down the child's phone number and contact her family, to assure her safety.

- An intern listened to a young woman describing what "the kids" told her to do on several occasions before realizing that these "kids" were the woman's alter personalities, of which there were several.

Expecting the Whole Story

In a mystery, you would never expect to get the whole story in the first chapter (unless it's an episode of Columbo, in which the viewer sees the murder take place and follows the story as the detective investigates the crime).

Remember Claudia Black's rules in a substance using family?

1. Don't Talk (this family has secrets and doesn't want to let others in to poke around).
2. Don't Feel (since the client isn't supposed to talk about what's going on in the family, it's easier to numb out feelings).
3. Don't Trust (when someone becomes numb and also learns to disregard promises made by parents who don't deliver, it is natural to become untrusting).
4. Don't Question (with the other rules in place, there is a lot less pain involved if the person just goes along with the program and does not challenge or question what goes on).

If we remember that our clients often come from families that operate with such unspoken rules, we will understand them better, and get less discouraged about progress. Trainees and interns often set themselves up for disappointment when they expect results on their own timeline.

- An intern was told that this 15-year old boy was a runaway, and that he was incorrigible. His attitude was surly and hostile, and he gave her either little information or changed his story from one session to the next. Her provisional diagnosis was Oppositional Defiant Disorder, with possible drug use. She was frustrated, felt like she was getting nowhere with him, and was considering a Boot Camp program. It took several sessions before he admitted a suicide attempt. Eventually, he revealed that his mother was alcoholic, kicked him out when she had her boyfriends over, and had told him "you would not have been born if your goddamn father had pulled out like I told him to." He dissolved in tears with this admission. The diagnosis was revised to Dysthymia and possible PTSD.

Expecting the Truth

Many trainees and interns are trusting people who presume that their clients will feel their sincerity and will therefore offer "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." However, just as characters in stories lie for many different reasons, so do clients. Depending on the client, our challenge is to take whatever we are told as possibly-or even probably-true, while also holding the possibility that it is not.

- One 16-year old had his trainee counselor convinced that his father was in Folsom, locked up for life. The boy claimed he was planning to commit a serious enough crime to be sent there as soon as he turned 18, so he could join him. A fair amount of "detective work," done with great discretion to avoid breaching confidentiality, revealed that in fact, his father had served time for a

minor offense, was out, and brought the boy to school every morning.

- A 15-year old boy dressed in tight pants, wore red shoes, and used make-up. He often had new clothes, CDs, and the latest electronics; considered costly for the neighborhood. When the trainee asked where he got all these things, he said he had a job after school. He provided details of the job, his boss, and his responsibilities. The trainee praised him for being so industrious. However, it turned out that the 45-year old manager of his apartment building was actually giving him gifts in exchange for sexual favors.

Incorrect Assumptions

In most cases, the price of incorrect assumptions is small and readily remedied, as in the first example. However, an assumption could become a matter of life and death.

- When told that a boy's father was gone from the family for Christmas, a new trainee said, "You must have been very sad that he wasn't with you." The boy replied that he was actually fine with it, since his father would have been drinking and putting him down if he'd been home. Later, the trainee realized that the parents were actually separated.
- One trainee looked sad as her 16-year old client left the room. "She came to say good-bye," she reported. "Good-bye, as in she's moving? Or good-bye, as in she's going to die?" I asked. The trainee replied that the girl seemed very depressed and was drinking heavily. Not knowing what to do, and without seeking guidance, she somehow assumed that there was nothing she could do and watched the girl walk right past me in the outer office. With much intervention, including calling school security and even going to the girl's home, the story had a much happier ending, but could have been tragic.

Direct Versus Round-About Questioning

Detective Columbo had a signature style of appearing to be bumbling and apologetic for the interruptions. But as he left an interview with the suspect, he would suddenly turn and ask one more question that caught the guilty person off-guard. Going relentlessly after information may be the "bad-cop" way to get at what's happened. But for most people, a more gentle and indirect approach will accomplish more.

Trainees sometimes err by not asking direct questions that will get them some useful information.

- An 11-year old boy with poor social skills told the trainee that, in addition to English, he also spoke two other languages. Both were unusual for this country, and definitely for the neighborhood. The trainee accepted this information without any follow-up. When I saw him on a different day I said I didn't know anyone who spoke either of those languages, and very pleasantly asked him to say something to me in one of them. He took an English word and added some sounds to it. Evidently, he had some general idea of what that language sounded like, but his claim to speaking it (as well as many other fabrications) seemed to reflect more of his need to bolster a fragile sense of his own worth.

But other times, they dig too deep, too soon, and push the client away by their probing.

- One of my personal examples of this experience was in asking too many questions about a child's family in our first meeting. The mom had recently been released from jail and the boy had returned to her custody. While our conversation began with open sharing, he suddenly became wary, and refused to talk to me again.

Only experience will teach how much, how soon, how direct. In general, if someone seems forthcoming, go ahead and ask, while taking all responses as part of the whole picture. If someone seems reluctant, then be less direct, use stories or metaphors, or circle back to difficult issues when the client is more responsive and more trusting.

In closing, I offer one of my favorite stories for trainees. It is a different kind of murder mystery, one that can help us remember that our clients must guide us in revealing the puzzle pieces of their lives:

The Caterpillar

Nikos Kazantzakis, Zorba the Greek

I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited awhile, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain.

It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.

That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.

Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D., has been licensed since 1976, and has supervised well over 100 trainees and interns in a counseling program she developed in a public school setting. She also has interns in her private practice in Studio City. She is currently designing a group program for clients with emotional aspects of rare medical conditions. To see some of the other story metaphors she likes, visit her website, www.LemonAidCounseling.com.