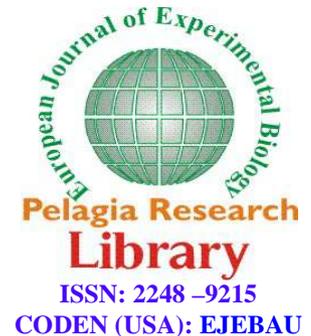




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**Storytelling and the search for meaning in sport psychology: Two case studies**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this article is to explore the use of storytelling in the course of consultation and how to make relation between the stories told in consultation sessions and other aspects of the athlete's mental function and also his or her social interactions. This study, which includes two case studies is written on the evaluation of the method of storytelling influential operation during remedial sessions with two martial artists, each faced respectively with uncertainty in decision-making, and state cognitive competitive anxiety based on their specific explanation. In this study, the psychotherapy process includes a combination of Neuro Linguistic Programming(NLP), cognitive therapy, and storytelling. The first two approaches revolve around the use of storytelling in the sessions held with clients as remedial intervention. The stories and metaphors used in the sessions held with the clients have been applied and studied from the two perspectives of the psychologist and the clients.*

**Keywords:** Sports psychology, Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), Storytelling,.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Storytelling is the conveying of events in words, and images, often by improvisation or embellishment. According to Michael Hall, humankind has a narrative consciousness and memory and so they naturally format events in terms of stories: who did it, what did they do, why, how, to what end, etc.? [1] Facts can be understood as smaller versions of a larger story, thus storytelling can supplement analytical thinking.

Stories can contribute to a thousand things—they inspire, motivate, teach, formulate understandings, set frames, reframe, de-frame, provide models for taking action, etc. [1]. According to Carless and Douglas, narrative is a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions over time [2]. By taking advantage of the special effects of storytelling, people may be able to release themselves from its dilemma and contribute to the improvement of human's full capabilities.

According to Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) view, stories and metaphors are quite useful in conveying messages and ideas and this is because of their natural transfer of new concepts and ideas into both conscious and unconscious mind [3]. Richard Bandler's skills when he uses his language in order to induce indirect suggestion by using metaphors and stories give us a clear-cut example of this claim. While the story listeners are engaged, they are able to imagine a new point of view, preparing a transformative and subjective experience [4]. This involves

allowing the client to be associated with the story as well as listen. This is mainly because stories have a multi-layer-meaning; clients listen closely and subconsciously identify the underlying knowledge in the story. As a result, the listener can activate knowledge and imagine new possibilities [5]. According to Hall, as for metaphor, “all language is metaphorical in nature because whatever we say is not the actuality but only a map or model of what is actual” [1].

A great deal of researches has been carried out based on using metaphors and storytelling in sport psychology [6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13], although they have not been used mainly in a therapeutic situation. From a therapeutic perspective, Andersen and Speed (2011) raise the question of whether metaphors, stories, and tales could be used to promote athletes' self-understanding in sports psychology. According to them, the more psychologists practice this method, the more they find that metaphors, folktales, and illustrative stories become central to the therapeutic process [14].

Despite the very important role that stories and metaphors can play in sport psychology as a therapeutic technique, there are very few studies in this area and almost no experimental study has investigated the possible effects of storytelling in therapeutic condition. Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill the existing gap and to explore further the possible effects of storytelling as a therapeutic technique on athletes. It aims to develop our understanding of the role of storytelling and metaphors in contributing to athletes' self-understanding. To this end, this research approach must be capable of fulfilling three fundamental requirements. First, adopt a suitable story for a certain client. Second, applying an appropriate story in a certain time of psychotherapeutic process. Third, considering other approaches of psychotherapy approach that are linked to storytelling such as Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) in order to address other possible unpredictable therapeutic conditions.

Therefore the main question in this investigation is: to what extent storytelling could be effective in a therapeutic condition? And how does the client respond to the stories told during the therapy session? By this exploratory case study inquiry we try to expand the use of storytelling and metaphors and examine them in action. Besides, we prepare the ground to understand and use any other psychological functions which would appear in our clients because of using stories and metaphors. Take, for example, athlete's perception which is related to his or her problem and therapeutic alliance. Case study was used in this research because it allows us to develop understanding and insight through in depth examination of a few individual psychological functions.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants of the study were recruited from therapy clients of the lead researcher. They are two athletes aged 12 and 23 who have faced with problems in their profession and sought for assistance. Direct observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted during and after each session of therapy with the lead researcher as a therapist. The first section of the interview focused on current sport and exercise activities. A second section sought descriptions of athletes' current psychological condition which was related to sport performance. The final section consisted of using story telling as main therapeutic technique. Descriptive questions (to learn about the participant's physical and mental experiences), structured questions (to investigate specific details of these experiences), and contrast questions (to clarify and check meaning and interpretation) were used throughout the interviews in an effort to generate a comprehensive and complex understanding of individual experience [15]. These interviews were recorded and transcribed to be analyzed in detail. To protect anonymity, both of our participants are referred to by pseudonym.

The interview transcripts were closely studied together with the therapist's comments and memos. In order to observe the mental development of the participants and to identify ideas and themes related to the use of storytelling in therapy sessions a content analysis was conducted and ideas were used as units of analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Case one: Small bird

This treatment refers to Parham, a 12-year boy, who had joined a Kung Fu club since he was eight because of his enthusiasm for this martial art. The therapist had eight sessions with him including one initial session with his mother in order to get a better insight of his attitudes, interests, and behavior.

In our first session, it was clearly revealed to me that he possessed improved self-awareness. His body language and the nature of his messages were in harmony, while he showed high intelligence. His mother, a psychologist influenced by Jung's theories, had told me in the session before that one that when her son was five, whenever he was annoyed by her or his father, he would sit in the courtyard with an intellectual gesture, asking his parents not to bother him while he was contemplating his problems. "He looks like Jung but just misses a pipe", his mother said. Clearly, the boy's premature intellectuality was credited to his mother's interest in Jung's theories and Jungian education. As a result, it was not unusual for him to listen to his audience's words carefully, analyze them patiently, and accept the reasonable parts like a democratic politician.

Still, he had a negative side too: "cruel perfectionism" instituted by his mother's biases and dreams. In fact, the mother herself was a potential heroine who's challenging life conditions had only allowed her to study: an achievement obtained in face of many hardships. Meanwhile, she had not managed to realize her other expectations, so she saw her second son who was closer to her as an instrument to achieve her unaccomplished ideals. Now, the mother, worried about possible harms threatening his son in higher age-group Kung Fu tournaments in which her son was supposed to compete, was facing a dilemma and had decided to refer to me.

After two sessions of consultation with Parham, I found an opportunity to convey the most central message to him through an allegory. To rely on a story matching his conditions, I selected the story from I-Ching, which is a Chinese sacred book. On the one hand, I-Ching was Bruce Lee's favorite who himself was Parham's hero, and, on the other hand, Jung had spent years studying the book. As a result, Parham was almost directly in contact with the book and its teachings. I used the said allegory when my in-depth negotiations with Parham started:

Meisam: Definitely, each athletic activity demands its specific physical and psychological strengths which, when achieved, can help you move toward gaining your goals a person with a purpose.

Parham: I know. Now, because of my intensive exercises I'm prepared enough to win the matches.

Meisam: Actually, winning the competitions, even when you possess all necessary age-related, physical and psychological factors, will depend on other incident such as your opponents' readiness, atmosphere of the competition environment, your coaches' morale, and other things. You can't control these factors. I guess you know what I mean because you have prior competition experience, don't you? By the way, you said you're 12 and in this tournament the competitors should be at least 14. Did you know that bone compactness and muscular strength between 12 and 14 age groups are so different? It can cause severe physical injury.

On the other hand, if you enter this competition you are officially ignoring the law and you should face the negative consequences if authorities find out about it.

Parham: I know. But whenever I got a title in other competitions, my family, teachers and friends would be so happy. I like the same thing to happen this time too.

With these remarks, he totally changed the discussion. In fact, he changed his position from an intellectual discussion to a motivational one, showing the need for encouragement and "gaining attraction". Since Parham seemed to be ready for the next level of therapy, the therapist addressed a deeper level of his cognition in the next session, which could cause a change in his emotion and behavior. Therefore the fourth session was focused on another allegory to help us achieve our goal. Here is a script of the fourth session:

Meisam: Did you know when you want your abilities to be appreciated by others, you should do something that makes you visible (to catch eyes)? I think we have already talked about I-Ching. You might have read this story in the book: A small bird that wants her voice to be heard should fly low. And if the bird flies higher than that it won't be heard anymore.

Parham immediately asked, "Do you mean I'm small?"

Meisam: Actually, this story is not about being small, but obviously about the fact that if you do something that matches your current conditions, you can attract others' attention. You know, if a precious beautiful singing bird flies deep into the sky, no one will hear its singing and it may be even an easy prey of eagles.

Parham: What should I do now?

Meisam: It's easy! Continue your exercises and participate in any competitions suitable for your age group.

The next session Parham reported to the therapist that his coach, seeing that he had performed a very advanced kung fu technique which was not suitable for his level and he failed at doing it, got angry and told him "Don't bite off more than you can chew". This proverb told by the coach was conveying the same meaning as the allegory that the therapist told him the previous session and thus Parham was very sad to hear this from his coach and told me that he believes the more you can do the better it would be but obviously, my coach thinks I am incapable of being good. He was in fact in the resisting or non-acceptance stage when some patients, refusing to change their thinking framework, try to label what they hear as wrong and not suitable.

Then I reminded him that he could not succeed in performing the technique because it was way beyond his abilities and even he could have injured himself. I also reminded him of the story of the little bird and told him that he should know what is suitable and within reach for him and that more is not always better.

I then tried to make the story simple and understandable to a 12-year old, I told him that when I was 9 my brother who was three years older than me had a very nice jacket and I loved to wear it. I always asked him to lend me his jacket and finally he agreed. I wore the jacket to school and I was thinking all my friends would admire the jacket, however, to my astonishment everyone started making fun of me. A friend asked me if that is my father's jacket, another laughed at me and said where did you find this jacket. I then asked Parham why do you think they made fun of me.

He started laughing and he said: it's obvious because it is like my little sister wearing my shoes. No matter how nice my shoes are, when my little sister wears them it looks silly.

This was a turning point in Parham's therapy sessions since it was the first time he not only understands the intended meaning of the stories but he also used another example to clarify the point for me. This can suggest that he understood the story this time and therefore for the story to be influential, the therapists should be very careful with the story they choose for different cases and take age, sex, and social background into consideration. For instance, in this case a story from real life situation works better as it is more understandable for a 12-year-old.

In the next session of therapy, he told me that he has decided not to participate in the competitions before he turns 14. He also decided to cut his Kung Fu exercises from six to three days a week and take English classes instead. I asked him why he has changed his decision.

He explained that "I don't want others laugh at me because I am wearing my older brother's jacket, I will go to competitions when I am ready for it" he added that "instead of focusing on just one aspect of my life, I should try to be successful in different aspects as well"

In this case Parham's resistance to the allegory of the therapist and his coach's proverb, and in the next step understanding the second story and trying to make another story of his own to make the therapist understand why his classmates laughed at him indicate the effect of storytelling on Parham. In the last session he referred to the story of wearing one's old brother's jacket and said some decisions are like that and are not logical. It can be seen that storytelling is influential but it sometimes needs time to affect the person.

As sport psychologists, while listening to the words of athletes and through our own personal experience, we learned about the all important role that storytelling plays in empowering therapists, coaches and athletes to synthesize and verbalize cognitive and even unconscious cognitive personal experiences as a human not only as an athlete, make known their feelings, and construct meaning processes critical to effective sport performance as well as personal growth.

### **3.2. Case two: The trap of perception**

Mahan was 23 years old when he referred to me. He held an M.A. in Physical Education and was already the champion of a national kickboxing tournament. Fortunately, Mahan's scientific and practical background allowed us to establish a relationship with mutual understanding.

Although Mahan's sport documents and his coach's report suggested that Mahan was a capable athlete, according to his coach's and his own reports, Mahan sometimes experienced intensive competitive anxiety with a specific type of cognitive state anxiety. Yet, the important point about Mahan was that when he had sufficient information about his opponents or place of competition, he would considerably perform better. As he put it, "Having information about the circumstances of the game can turn me into a dangerous lion from a delicate deer." The most important remedial procedures related to Mahan included Meta Models language patterns and storytelling. The following is an excerpt of the interview I had with Mahan, and it represents the purpose of this paper. It would be necessary to mention that this interview mainly has been based on Meta Models questioning method, which is commonly used by the experts of Neuro Linguistic Programming.

Meisam: You referred to me because sometimes you feel anxiety. Can you tell me how you exactly recognize that you're anxious?

Mahan: Well, I experience different emotions while competing in a match; for example, when I feel confident I can pull myself together better. But when I feel anxious I'm distraught.

Meisam: What do you mean by "distraught"?

Mahan: My mind gets disturbed; I can't concentrate on winning and the sense of victory.

Meisam: Under such circumstances, what replaces this feeling?

Mahan: I do self-talk, trying to change my mental image. But it makes me more confused and anxious.

Meisam: You said "mental image"? What do you see in your mind exactly?

Mahan: I feel that things are getting bad, and I finally start thinking about my failure. I see the situation critical.

Meisam: Have you ever been in competitive situations where you didn't have such images?

Mahan: Yes, a lot of times.

Meisam: Can you describe the situations in which you didn't have such images?

Mahan: For example, if I've been to a place or know the opponent or his coach or friends, I'm convinced that I can knock off my opponent.

Meisam: Well, I've checked out your résumé and know that you've had top performance, but, contrary to some other athletes at your level, you experience intense anxiety sometimes and your performance doesn't even qualify as club exercises. What is the difference between you and other champions who don't feel anxiety as much as you do?

Mahan: I don't know! Maybe they're more confident.

Meisam: The truth is that you are highly confident even when you experience anxiety. I wonder if others at your rank should also have a lot of information about the match and their opponents to feel confident!

Mahan: I know some of them who perform well even if they don't have much information.

Meisam: What do you think is the cause of this difference? In reality, they and you face almost similar situations but make different reactions. The basic question is what causes the difference.

Mahan: I don't really know. I do need to feel more comfortable.

The first part of Mahan's treatment involved increasing his awareness of the reactions that an individual makes towards his conceptions and perceptions. So, in the second session, I explained to him:

As you pointed out at the beginning of our discussion, when you feel victorious as opposed to when you feel defeated, you experience a series of mental images that anticipate a favorable or hopeless future. Yet, these are not the real events that are happening or will happen, but your mind represents them to you.

The word “represent” here can be used to refer to the mental mechanism which reflects an individual’s perceptions through mental images. The more homogeneous the perceptions or interpretations with reality, the less confused and stressed the individual will be. Still, individuals who make exaggeratingly positive or negative responses create assumptions far from reality. To transfer these concepts to Mahan, I used one of Alfred Korzybski’s quotes, which is one of Neuro Linguistic Programming’s presuppositions also.

Meisam: Alfred Korzybski has a quote which I always remember:

The map is not the territory. What this means is that our perception (map) of reality (territory) is not reality itself but our own version of it, or our “map”.

Polish-American scientist and philosopher Alfred Korzybski remarked that “the map is not the territory”, encapsulating his view that an abstraction derived from something, or a reaction to it, is not the thing itself. Korzybski held that many people do confuse maps with territories, that is, confuse models of reality with reality itself. This quote was then elaborated in more detail, using several examples from real life until the Mahan found out that he was going through the same situation. Mahan was actually making reactions to his mental experience about processes and events happening in a sport atmosphere, but not exactly to real competition conditions. The metaphor “perception is a map” helped him consider reality as an image created through his mental processes but not the reality itself. Such a view, instead of encouraging the athlete to be optimistic, helps him realize that flexibility in beliefs, values and evaluations can offer more options to him, consequently increasing his chance of winning.

As we continued, to make him distinguish cognitive processes from external reality, I told him:

The unproductive mental images you told me about are simply assumptions which are represented to your mind through a series of images, but they are not real competition results revealed to you in advance. Your thoughts and feelings, when you undergo anxiety, don’t present real or conclusive reasons for future results but they directly emerge from your interpretations. The assumptions come from a part of your mind which stores your beliefs and values, as well as your attitude to competition, your coach, your opponent, and even your family, while shaping your worldview. This “sustainable perception” inclines your mind toward a particular interpretation of events, and finally conditions your recurrent response.

People are mostly interested in using their own metaphors and stories to express their experiences and generalize these results to other same situations. In fact, generalization is the basis for the formation of humans’ beliefs [16]. What people believe about the world is how they interact within it. Most often it is their beliefs that limit them. We have beliefs about competition, victory, our capabilities, spirituality and our environment, right and wrong, what is just and unjust, and whether or not we can change.

Psychologically speaking, the nature of our reactions to the external world is basically determined by the way we perceived it [18]. Each individual possesses a set of experiences and perceptions shaping his or her psychological history which, like other characteristics, is a specific attribute of that individual. Just as a person’s behavioral qualities are different from those of another person, so are his or her individual growth and experiences. This difference is so extensive that two individuals cannot have exactly the same experiences even under identical conditions. Although they may share certain characteristics, in a good number of cases, they may exhibit many differences. These experience-related differences emphasize the fact that each of us creates a subjective model of the world that may be different from others’ subjective patterns and perceptions [3]. At the end of this session he was convinced that what one thinks is true is not the reality and he sometimes takes the map as territory and he has to change it. This in itself was a great improvement.

The third session started with the assumption that the ability to conceptualize is a human faculty. But the question is what the things that a human being would like to imagine everyday are. So, I asked him, “If you’re able to create so many negatively predictive images, then why don’t you use this ability to predict positive events based on your strengths? At least, these intentional conceptions match your background more.”

This is widely accepted that the brain reacts to our conceptions and perceptions but not the reality itself. The brain perceives recurrent images as reality [17]. I recounted a Mullah Nasruddin anecdote to Mahan that humorously describes a how a person can be even influenced by himself or herself. The story simply conveys the message that whatever a person creates in mind will finally conditions the person's behaviors:

Once Mullah Nasruddin lied to a passerby saying that about 1 mile south of town free food was being shared. The passerby believed him and went home to take a bowl, heading his destination. On his way, the passerby told the news to anyone who crossed his path until the news was distributed all over the town, and all inhabitants were heading south, holding bowls in their hands. Mullah Nasruddin then asked a person in hurry what was going on and he told him that free food was being given south of town. Mullah Nasruddin hastened to his house, took a bowl, and decided to head the place in question. His friend, who was witnessing the story from its beginning, asked Mullah Nasruddin, "Didn't you start this rumor? Why are going there too?" Mullah Nasruddin replied, "Can't you see everyone is going there; it might be real."

After that, I used a brain-as-bus metaphor: If you do not hold the steering wheel firmly, it will take you wherever it wants or sometimes it may harm others. What distinguishes professional athletes is the way they use their cognitive competences. Although professionals make these reactions subconsciously and automatically because of their rich experiences, there are some athletes at Mahan's level who reach similar results through consciously practicing, controlling and recreating their minds. The same thing holds true for unproductive thoughts:

Our perception often expressed consciously, yet most of the time information operates outside of our awareness and we do not realize that they can be changed to serve us in better ways. While we all have similar neurological structure, it functions differently in all of us. As a result, no two people can have exactly the same interpretation. This is the basis for some athletes' problems in competitive situation when they try to impose their map upon another person like his or her coach or families. Learning to choose the structure of another point of view allows us to see the world through another aspect and therefore improve our mental and behavioral options.

This metaphor, considering its connotation which emphasizes flexibility and fluidity of thoughts, not only conveys the message to the athlete that his anxiety is provoked by his own assumptions, but also it can influence his life as a person. A humanistic approach clarifies that becoming the champion is not the sole value at stake, but equally important is developing an "experience of the self" which helps the athlete to express himself completely. The need for such an approach was more felt in case of Mahan, who suffered from competitive anxiety; Mahan's experience of anxiety could even affect other aspects of his life.

Any athlete cannot truly know the world as it is, like other people, not only because their conscious awareness is limited, but even that tiny bit that gets in they experience through the conscious and unconscious filters that they have, like their beliefs, values and states. And because every athlete experiences the sport event differently, that could be said that the map is not the territory: all athletes have a different experience of reality than others do, and it is not about being any more right or wrong than others is. If somebody pre-supposes that the map is not the territory, then he or she will automatically assume that his or her beliefs do not always reflect reality accurately. And this is great news for an athlete who is looking for a new point of view. His or her coach or family (and even he or she) with their special own beliefs might have lived their whole life believing something is so, but just because they believed in Santa Claus did not make it so. Therefore, nobody should accept a certain idea because others are believed in that.

In the fourth session which was the last session of therapy, he reported that during the last four weeks he has started to see things differently. He has accepted that the reality is not always what one feels because one's feelings can vary based on different situations. The only thing people can do is to try to see the reality and change their feelings in a way that could be beneficial for them. He then refers to the quotation "the map is not the territory" and says that it has helped him a lot in understanding that what one regards as reality is dependent one's point of view. Therefore, he was acknowledging that human cognition plays an important role in perceiving the realities of life.

He then explained that during a competition last week he tried to follow my guidelines and he has experienced less anxiety. "I said to myself" he adds "when human mind believes what he thinks about, like in the story of Mullah Nasruddin, why not focus on something positive that can help me achieve my goal". Therefore, "I decided to focus on the outcome I want to get from the competition, even though I did not know my opponent completely" and he

said that he was to some extent successful and won the competition by focusing on his abilities and what he can achieve.

The fact that in both cases the athletes has referred to the stories and allegories when they were asked about the reason they have changed their decision and behavior, supports the hypothesis of the research. This shows that allegories can play a significant role in conveying meaning and that human cognition gets the implied meaning of stories and analyzes it accordingly.

In the process of our case studies with regard to storytelling in the treatment of athletes, we found that they show different reactions to remedial stories and clues that provide evidences of their mental realities. As it has been brought in this article, the first case resisted at first, but after getting the meaning behind the allegory, he reached a definite conclusion to take a new decision. Regarding to the second case, storytelling creates a new understanding in the athlete of how to interpret the events, and subsequently the start of main remedial process. Their referring back to the stories and allegories in the interviews with them reveal that narrative therapy could be very useful in the therapy sessions but great care should be taken in choosing stories based on age and social background of the client. However, the result of treatment could not be planned and predicted by relying on this model, and it is better that it is applied as a complementary therapy with combination of other remedial models such as psychoanalysis, cognitive behavioural therapy, and/or schema therapy to provide new concepts when directly offering treatment recommendations to patient is problematic, and also to have mutual understanding with the patient's cognitive patterns when he tries to express his perceptions and experiences with his metaphoric sentences. That's why we recommend coaches, trainers, and also sport psychologists to consider language not only as a representation of reality, but as a bed which has placed deep concepts and symbols in it. This helps remedial process to be a dynamic and meaningful process.

## CONCLUSION

This paper and studies like this clarify that storytelling can actively involve conscious and subconscious perceptions in solving problems, helping the individual to develop introspection. Yet, the reaction that clients show to stories as well as the stories and especially metaphors they use to describe themselves reveal to us that storytelling can help us unravel athletes' thoughts and tendencies which exist at a subconscious level. In educational areas including schools, it is generally believed that stories can serve as behavior-modifying tools. Although this opinion is acceptable, we have so far been concentrated on the assumption that stories and metaphors primarily engage the person's cognitive abilities. Because of this reason they can simply help a person to experience introspection and cognitive renewal, and if the therapist or coach uses them skillfully, they can serve as long-term methods for cultivating deep meanings in athletes' minds, enhancing athletes' understanding of themselves and their interaction with the external world. One of the special aspects of using stories and metaphors in the course of consultation or therapy is that they can convey messages with subtlety and in harmony with clients' concerns. The whole process finally reduces clients' resistance, directing them toward the course considered by the therapist or coach [19]. In this paper, researchers focused on certain cases observed during the course of sessions with two athletes, while storytelling and metaphors played a key role in progressing. We rely on storytelling and metaphors in our remedial procedures because we believe that metaphors and stories take into the realm of deep personal experience, connectedness, what it means to be alive, and even the possibility of transformation. Because metaphors and stories, like a dream, engage the metaphoric function of the brain, they represent the current status of the individual's life and his or her conscious and unconscious perceptions.

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