

# Enactive Approach to Metaphoric Engagements of Children with ASD

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## Abstract

This short commentary summarizes the key proposals of Rucińska, Fondelli & Gallagher's 2021 article in *Healthcare* called "Embodied Imagination and Metaphor Use in Autism Spectrum Disorder". The main gist of their article is that children with ASD have the embodied imaginative skills necessary to think metaphorically, and can enact metaphors in therapeutic practices when invited to explore metaphors in dialogue and in play. This approach reverses the standard idea that metaphoric engagement is strictly a matter of semantic capacities, and is out of reach for people with ASD.

**Keywords:** Metaphors • Autism • Enactivism • Embodiment • Imagination

## Description

Can autistic children think metaphorically? Many have found that people with autism have difficulties with metaphor comprehension [1], and children seem to be "anchored to literal interpretations" [2]. In search of how to help autistic children develop their metaphoric skills, the current research focuses on aiding them in developing their linguistic skills, in order to enhance their metaphor comprehension and production [3]. That is because a metaphor, understood as a violation of established rules and categories, is categorized as a linguistic skill to begin with. Metaphoric competency is strongly associated with semantic capacities, which is then said to require imagination to allow "mental juxtaposition of objects into novel combinations" [3].

As many children with ASD are said to have difficulties with linguistic and imaginative activities [4], they are said to have a diminished skill in symbolic and imaginative thinking. From that perspective, one way to better their skills is through linguistic training programs like Mental Imagery Therapy for Autism (MITA) [3,5], that focuses on vocabulary-building exercises to train mental imagery and integrate mental object in novel ways.

But is this the best form of intervention to bring about metaphoric engagements? Must we train linguistic skills to develop imagination necessary for metaphoric thinking? And is this view of metaphors and imagination justified to begin with?

From a different conceptual starting point—one endorsed by Embodied and Enactive Cognitive Science—metaphoric thinking need not be seen as a mere linguistic capacity, but should be seen

as first and foremost an embodied process grounded in perceptual-motor systems and in explicit interactions. Imagination is not a cognitive process occurring solely in the head, detached from action, but is grounded in embodied motor activations and neural simulations. It is strongly integrated with perception and sensory-motor processes, and even necessitates active participation and interaction [6,7]. Simply put, this alternative approach to imagination says that the body in action plays a crucial role in imagining:

"In the imagining process, our body and the way our body moves play a role: the imaginary movement (...) involves an activation of some of the same sensory-motor processes that would be contingently involved in, and would constrain, our actual movement if we were actually moving." [8].

Explicit movement also furthers our capacity to engage in new forms of imagining, such as allowing us to imagine situations that were unimaginable before.

This makes a difference to how to think about imaginative skills of autistic people, and how to further their metaphoric skills. Firstly, a person on the spectrum should be seen as having their own, unique way of imagining, rooted in their own unique set of sensorimotor contingencies. Any characterization of the autistic person as having 'diminished' or 'malfunctioning' imagination may simply be a failure to acknowledge the rich variety of imaginative skills human beings possess, ones that are not necessarily tied to language but are rooted in one's own embodiment.

Secondly, regarding furthering metaphoric skills, we propose that metaphors (rooted in embodied imagination) can be enacted in performance, both in pretend play and in dialogue. Metaphors are

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grounded physical, embodied processes but they are not encountered in a passive way; they are brought to existence through action [7]. It is what one does with the metaphor that counts: the metaphoric meanings are not just there, static, waiting to be discovered, but are made sense of in interaction, and are co-constructed in dialogue. Thus, metaphors are best seen as tools that afford bringing about new actions, not as static linguistic products.

Consider the case in point [8]. Illustrate their views with a description of metaphoric engagements of Noah, an autistic child of 12 years of age, who joins a systemic therapist in a therapeutic session. Systemic therapy is not about providing diagnoses or teaching new skills (e.g., teaching metaphoric thinking), but about jointly reflecting with the others on their problems, and on opening up, in dialogue or in play, new perspectives, through which specific action possibilities can come about.

The therapist picks up on Noah's embodied metaphors (e.g., "switching" between moods, building a "wall" around oneself), and uses them as tools to further the dialogue and open up new perspectives ("how many "switch" positions do you think people have?"; "So that's your wall. But maybe you want to build it?", and passing toy blocks). The metaphoric meanings of the objects were uncovered in dialogue and changed with active movement and play (e.g., taking apart the "wall" brick by brick, as opposed to trying to smash it down). Importantly, the use of metaphors in this therapeutic encounter was not directed only at "uncovering the experience" of the client, but at changing those experiences [7]. Using metaphors in such a way offered Noah the possibility to imagine being able to change rote situations, and handle negative emotions [9,10].

## Conclusion

The embodied-enactive approach re-conceptualizes what it is to imagine and what is needed for metaphoric engagements. Imagining is grounded in embodied motor activations, and metaphoric engagement is an act of sense making, unfolding in the interaction. Importantly, it is not the case that metaphoric engagement must be off limits to children with ASD. From our perspective, therapeutic interventions that make use of metaphors and symbolic play are possible forms of engagements with children on the autism spectrum.

The shift from the linguistic to the embodied-enactive framework of metaphoric and imaginative processes brings about a new, functional dimension to the issue of metaphor use. In essence, it

can suggest new intervention strategies, focusing on promoting interactive methods where one can playfully engage with metaphors and enhance imaginative skills. Rather than focusing on context less training of imaginative/linguistic capacities, the suggestion is to also create contexts in which imagination can be developed and used within uniquely situated interactions.

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