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# Integrating Tarot readings into counselling and psychotherapy

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## **Abstract**

This paper is based on research conducted between 1992 and 1994 under the auspices of the Behavioral Board Science Examiners in California, USA, and for the purpose of satisfying requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Marriage, Family and Child Counseling. In the current global climate permeated by diverse beliefs, disparate values and cultural conflicts (natural disasters notwithstanding), an integrative approach to therapy is paramount for maintaining public mental health. The purpose of this paper is not only to contribute to the desensitization of some preconceived ideas regarding Tarot but also so that the author may share the practical knowledge she has initially obtained for herself and which can be used as a means towards achieving people's well-being and emotional security, as well as making sense of different and conflicting experiences. The research subjects' verbal reports, as their immediate self-reflection on each individual reading, constitute the focal point of this paper.

**Key words:** emotional security, experience, interpretation, phenomenology, Tarot symbolism

## **Introduction**

The research discussed here was conducted for the purpose of introducing the modality of Tarot readings to mental health professionals. While this paper focuses mainly on the empirical data collected in the clinical part of my study, I feel it is necessary to present a brief overview of the total material comprising the research. The idea is founded on an existing trend towards an integrative approach to psychotherapy. Corey (1991) advocates an integrative perspective that would have taken into consideration therapists' willingness to look

into the expansion of their own theoretical orientations and into a possibility to widen the range of techniques to accommodate a diverse client population. A decade ago he was already asserting an increased emphasis on spiritual perspective as part of the *Zeitgeist*. The objective of my study thus became to make an inquiry into Tarot readings as a potential modality complementing those offered by traditional psychotherapies.

Rather than aiming to prove or disprove anything, to compare or contrast, I just wanted to acquaint the profession with the powerful,

albeit often misunderstood, technique. However, the conventional quantitative research did not seem feasible. As for any unconventional research, it is usually considered radical and hence subject to an a priori prejudice. Nothing should prevent an existing phenomenon from becoming a subject of inquiry, however. In order to accomplish this objective, that is, to conduct adequate research on a non-traditional topic, I implemented a method of naturalistic inquiry, which in a broader sense is called phenomenological research. The research approach utilizing phenomenological reports together with behavioural data, and emphasizing the role of naturalistic observation and the presence (at least in *potential*) of a naturalistic target is called for in contemporary psychology and social sciences (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990).

According to its founder Edmund Husserl, a faithful description of the phenomenon as it presents itself within one's experience, and without theories about causal explanations of the data or conceptual presuppositions, constitutes a prime objective of phenomenology. An absence of a hypothesis and accordingly absence of a linear cause–effect relationship in phenomenology seems to correlate strongly with a possible 'a-causal' explanatory principle, namely Jung's synchronicity, as applied to Tarot. Another Husserlian standpoint supports the very process of a reading, during which *noemata* and *noesis* are related in such a way that the phenomenon in question appears to be intuitively present to a person (Semetsky, 2004a). Phenomenological methodology indeed demonstrated itself as an alternative position that cannot be simply ignored (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990).

As regards naturalistic methods, my study may be called exploratory and the procedure descriptive. By exploring various manifestations of the phenomenon of Tarot, I have arrived at the following profiles, each capable of conveying in part its essence: the origins of Tarot; the nature of Tarot; Tarot and life cycles; Tarot and personality

theories; and Tarot as a projective technique. The phenomenological approach was beneficial for addressing the *noematic* structure of Tarot and, in so doing, its hitherto obscured realm has acquired some clarity. The psychological profile of Tarot has been expanded in the context of theories postulated by Jung, Maslow, Kelly, Sullivan and others. I have suggested that Tarot may be looked at from the viewpoint of projective techniques and as such considered parallel to the Rorschach test in terms of being a sort of a structured interview (Cogen et al., 1992) for investigating interpersonal transactions. Behavioural data have been collected, and it is those data that have been presented in my original study and which constitute the focus of the present paper. Detailed descriptive analysis of each individual reading session together with their consequent interpretive synthesis are omitted here for the sake of brevity; however, my subjects' verbal protocols representing reflection on the whole meta-cognitive spectrum of their own thoughts, affective states and behavioural events of which they became aware as a result of readings, as well as some clinical implications as a follow-up of the said analysis, are presented in the conclusion to this paper.

## Glossary

I assume a necessity to introduce the following specific terms used in this paper:

- *Tarot*: a deck of the 78 pictorial cards, 22 of which are called the Major Arcana. Their images may be considered to symbolically represent Jungian archetypes of the collective unconscious. The remaining 56 minor cards represent patterns of habitual behaviour accompanied by the spectrum of feelings, emotions, desires, beliefs, and other psychodynamic processes and related affective and mental states.
- *Layout*: a particular pattern of the cards. Each position in a sequence does have some specific therapeutic connotations.

- *Reader*: a person who is trained in Tarot readings and has developed her/his sensitivity and intuition so as to secure readings of a high reliability. In the context of this study an expert reader is assumed to have also been a qualified therapist or other mental health professional who has gained some additional abilities and skills through appropriate personal and professional development.
- *Tarot Reading*: a session between a subject and a reader (myself, in the context of this study) when the cards are shuffled and then spread in a particular layout. Their meanings are then narrated and interpreted by a reader who explores – ‘reads’ – the information that, in a quite astonishing way, becomes available to consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The session is further enhanced by a dialogue between the client and the reader, during which a variety of diverse therapeutic elements is being used (cf. Corsini and Wedding, 1989).

To clarify these assertions, let me employ a computer metaphor borrowed from Nobel Prize winner Herbert A. Simon: ‘Computers were originally invented to process patterns denoting numbers, but they are not limited to that use. The patterns stored in them can denote numbers, or words, or lizards, or thunderstorms, or the idea of justice. If you open a computer and look inside, you will not find numbers (or bits, for that matter); you will find patterns of electromagnetism’ (Simon, 1995, p. 31). We do not know what we may find if we ever ‘open’ a human mind and look inside: mind is an intangible ‘thing’ after all. But we may find something if we operate upon the mind *projected* though quite tangible properties of the cards with their picturesque images that carry powerful symbolic meanings. Turning to Simon again, ‘a symbol is simply the pattern, made of any substance whatsoever, that is used to denote, or point to, some other symbol, or object or relation between objects. The thing it points to is called its *meaning*’ (1995, p. 31).

Pictures, as extra-linguistic structures, are also symbolic and can be used to make inferences, especially if they can denote (as Simon pointed out) the idea of justice – and Justice happens to be the major card number XI; or Strength – the card number VIII; or Temperance – the card number XIV; and so on. Sure enough, pictures are worth more than many thousands of words. When combined in a layout, the cards form a symbol system that may be ‘read’, that is, its patterns recognized – providing of course that both syntactic and semantic rules which parallel some formal code as the expressive ‘language’ of Tarot symbolism are known to an expert reader. In what follows, I shall focus on readings per se and their therapeutic value for the subjects.

## Study design

To satisfy the research requirement of collecting behavioural data via human subjects I proceeded with performing readings for the self-selected sample. Fifteen cases have been chosen for the purpose of clinical illustrations as regards the therapeutic value of Tarot readings. I would like to stress again that my task was not to conduct a quantitative analysis but – in accordance with phenomenological methodology – to describe each reading in qualitative terms. Since I considered any hypothesis testing to be premature at the level of pilot study, the presence of a control group did not seem feasible or useful. Just the opposite: to offer a control group might have eliminated the phenomenological emphasis on neutrality, or redirected attention to the unnecessary comparison of modalities, or led therapists to think in terms of what a counselling session *should* be or do, rather than of what it is. This part of the study was only one of the phenomenological ‘brackets’ of the total research aiming not to offer a new view of therapy but to facilitate a novel way of viewing therapy.

Certain assumptions were made and limitations addressed. It was within the scope of

this study to assume that a therapist must be both capable of and trained in reading the Tarot cards before utilizing this modality as an element of therapy. Thus having been an expert reader became a prerequisite. I spent many years practising Tarot as well as investigating its philosophical and psychological implications: the process of learning from experience never stops but becomes a way of life. It would have been unethical to offer this modality, even at the introductory stage, to the clients otherwise. It is understandable and a matter of fact that unless a therapist is trained in, say, hypnosis, it would be out of her scope and contrary to her professional ethics to offer to clients that particular method; the same applies to Tarot. I have obtained my subjects' consent regarding their willingness to participate in the study and accordingly to release private and confidential information as per process recording. The sessions were audiotaped, the cards' layouts were photocopied, and each subject answered a three-page questionnaire (summarized later) as a follow-up to the reading, thereby serving as a means of self-reflection. The reason that I selected only 15 cases for detailed description in my research is a simple one. I simply stopped collecting data because those 15 counselling sessions when described almost verbatim amounted to the number of pages exceeding the requirements of my research. Incidentally (or synchronistically?), this sample happened to cover a diverse adult population of males and females across different ethnic groups. In this regard, no case was ignored; recommendations were made, however, with regard to exploring the possibility of other findings in follow-up research.

Each subject was to state her presenting problem on a questionnaire, similar to a question usually asked during an initial interview with regard to what bothers a client now. Each subject was also to state the purpose of her reading, similar to when we may ask our clients what they expect from their therapy. No more specific questions – as they usually appear

on a conventional intake form, concerning past psychotherapy, family members, etc. – were stated on the questionnaire. All relevant information was assumed to have been projected in a particular card in a specific position and, when present in the spread, 'read' and interpreted by a reader in due course. The reading process is based on a reader's ability to recognize patterns at the symbolic level so as to be able to 'decode' them, that is, to translate them into a spoken language. Similar thought processes were a subject of Simon's research; he described such an inference in terms of the recognition of features that would have given an experienced person some reliable cues for how to interpret it. Simon suggested that 'these recognition capabilities account for experts' abilities to respond to many situations 'intuitively' ... [and not] to hypothesize additional mechanisms to explain intuition or insight' (Simon 1995, p. 35).<sup>2</sup>

The spread chosen for my study has included, but was not limited to, 10 specific positions that semantically presented information in the following context:

1. Presenting problem as the core of the client's present concern, which may be either acknowledged or denied by a client. In this study, the subjects' concerns covered mainly personal or professional problems. The questionnaire included a 'no problem at all' option so that the subjects, if so willing, would have been able to exercise this particular option. The symbolic content of the particular card in the context of a presenting problem enables an expert reader to enrich and/or verify information that might have been indicated by the subject.
2. Some influence in a form of an impulse, or feeling, or trait, or behavioural pattern (not necessarily a subject's own), or an event that may have strengthened or weakened the problem a client is concerned with. Under this influence the situation may grow and develop or, vice versa, the development and progress may be hindered.

3. Unconscious motivations affecting the current situation as it appears in the here-and-now of the reading. Perhaps the subject is trying to solve her problem at the unconscious level; or maybe the roots of the matter are deeply engraved in the subject's subconscious and appear in her dreams; also something of a sort of hidden variable that made an otherwise comprehensible situation a real problem-solving exercise for this client.
  4. Unfinished business (in Gestalt terminology), which might have led to the present problem. This is a position of the past in a temporal sense: a situation that took place and whose implications still persist. Depending on the number of cards in this position and their symbolic content, the information they convey may be quite significant. Phenomenologically, it can be 'reduced' to the essence of the subject's past history as it pertains to her problem to date.
  5. Conscious motivation; however, outside of the subject's cognitive awareness. Perhaps she has been behaving in a certain manner or just thinking in a particular way and in doing so has projected the mental content into the future. This position reflects on a subject's potential future that might or might not come into being.<sup>3</sup> At this point a reader may want to investigate whether this behaviour or thinking (as conveyed by the imagery of the card in this position) is to the client's best advantage. Is it favourable to her well-being? How might it affect her mental and emotional health?
  6. The necessary development of the present situation. It is important to take into consideration the transpersonal perspective and to respect the fact that transpersonal psychologies recognize spiritual realities over and above our physical world. From this standpoint we may assume that the occurrence of an event might have already taken place at what has been called by Simon *the level just above* but not yet manifest in the neuronal structure or perceived by physical senses.
  7. Mental outlook of the subject, her attitude or mood. What is it that her mind is occupied with? Symbolic content of a particular card (or cards) in this position may indicate a thought/affect connection for the subject in her current state of mind.
  8. Environment; support system; or sometimes the lack of it. Significant others, family, friends, business associates. What is their attitude? In what context does the subject have to deal with her problem? What is the level of interpersonal relationships? What is the role of 'the other'?
  9. Expectations, aspirations, hopes and ideals with regard to an important matter either directly or indirectly related to the presenting problem. Often hopes are connected with fears and anxiety. Is such a feeling justified by the collective unconscious? What is revealed by the subject's reality testing?
  10. A possible destination of the whole situation, which is highly dependent on the subject's current level of awareness. The assumption here is that continuous feedback at the reading and the back and forth of free associations do contribute to expanding the client's awareness. Indeed, perception and realization of new meanings in one's intention may very well create a change. This 'outcome' card is to be read in conjunction with the rest of the layout and by no means is to be considered as an impending fate. Rather, it contains information enriched both by the dynamics that have unfolded in the course of the counselling session up to this point and the therapeutic relationship that has surely been developing within a session. This may contribute to transformation and a probable change in attitude, all attributes of the effective counselling.
- A reading, very much like a traditional therapy session, is a dynamic process towards awakening one's conscious awareness. The interpretation per se is of secondary importance, the primary factor is what this interpretation triggers in a subject's mind and how she is going to respond to it – and this is the turning point at which Tarot acquires therapeutic value. As such, the

described positions provide a sufficient context that may otherwise (and quite often) have not even been addressed in a single traditional session. The specific content depends on which particular card is falling into which position, on what the proximity is of cards to each other, and – mainly – on the intuition and insight of the reader. As there are 78 cards in a deck, even with only 10 positions in a spread the number of possible combinations and permutations is huge and tends to infinity if the structure of a layout is more complex. And sure enough, despite many typical – archetypal – characters or situations (birth, death, love, hate, separation, deception, etc.) each individual life and set of circumstances are unique. A reading process is not a shortcut. Each position, and accordingly the message or information provided by the cards' symbolism, may become a focus for a subsequent reading, thereby offering an additional dimension to be explored.

It has also been assumed that a situation might arise when, due to their sheer curiosity and an opportunity to get a free reading, I would have encountered some clients who psychologically would not be ready for therapy, that is, under other circumstances they would have not even considered undergoing counselling. Irrespective of this fact, their readings would have still contained therapeutic material to work with as each subject's specific circumstances, personality type, intrapsychic conflicts and interpersonal relationships would have been projected in the sequence of the cards and would have formed a pattern, thus providing some clinical data for performing therapy. Each reading in a dialogue with a subject took approximately 50 minutes, that is, the duration of a standard counselling session.

Some limitations arose from the fact that the readings conducted for my subjects were outside a traditional clinical setting in the sense that, although I was supervised by a licensed clinical social worker, her responsibilities were limited to my fulfilling the educational requirements but not her validating my expertise in Tarot. Naturally,

such a responsibility could not and would not have been assumed by a supervisor who herself was not a reader. My study was also limited to individual counselling only. Although there exist the types of spreads that permit for couples (relationship) counselling, I considered it premature to conduct such types of readings during an early introductory stage. By serendipity, though, I happened to have couples that have asked for an individual reading for each spouse (as per cases 8–9 and 12–13 mentioned below).

A significant limitation of my study was the fact that only one session has been conducted for each respective subject. In a sense, this session served the purpose of what in traditional therapy would have been called an initial interview. If I set up the task of researching the initial interview situation, perhaps the question of it being a single session would not even be raised. On the other hand, in the reality of present-day managed care, a limited number of sessions might be quite welcome. The beauty of the Tarot is such that in the course of even one session the amount and quality of information available for an experienced reader and the associative feedback that this information triggers for the subjects is tantamount to successful therapy. Since the objective within this particular phenomenological 'bracket' was to provide the clinical illustrations of readings, I would argue that this objective was satisfied. The analogy may be a reference to a drawing that may provide a sufficient illustration to a story, which takes up, say, 20 pages.

Any long-term effects though were outside the scope of this pilot study and could only be speculated on. However, since the task of my research was not to evaluate the effectiveness of Tarot but merely to introduce it to mental health professionals, I would argue that it was premature and against the particular objectives of my research to have made any claims in this respect at that point. Since the late 1970s, when Bergin and Lambert (1978) undertook a comprehensive examination of the available data for assessment in psychotherapy, it became clear

how complex and enormous the task was and still is. In this respect I join Richard Roberts (1987) who believes that the success or failure of any method depends on the level of consciousness of the practitioner using this method rather than on method per se. Roberts's verbatim report of his reading for Joseph Campbell is a terrific example of an effective session, owing to the level of intelligence of both participants. Laura Huxley – the widow of a famous author and herself an Honorary Doctor of Human Services and recipient of the Peace Prize in 1990 – was asked whether she had found any psychological techniques to be especially valuable or whether the success of a particular method varies for different persons (Brown and Novick, 1993). Her answer was that, despite many existing techniques being effective in the hands of a capable therapist, the most important factor remains the relationship between the guide and the client. From this standpoint, the relationship with my subjects that had been developing within reading sessions itself became a therapeutic component.

Some of my subjects have benefited from even a single session, as can be seen from their feedback (see below); some, however, were not yet ready for a therapeutic change. The effect of any session depends on many factors affecting subjects irrespective of which therapeutic modality is being used. I always remember this

guideline (Paul, 1967): what treatment, by whom, is the most effective for this particular individual with such-and-such a specific problem and under what set of specific circumstances? However, it is worth adding here that the aforementioned *what* and *this* are being conveyed via Tarot readings with clarity and accuracy so as to enable the best possible therapeutic intervention on behalf of a therapist. By no means do I assert that the material as gathered and presented in each reading amounts to a total collection of clinical data, even if the subjects themselves stated on their respective questionnaires that they had indeed received significant and meaningful readings. On the other hand, if a client's concern has been validated, her well-being addressed, and her emotional security achieved, should a therapist wish for more?

## Clinical illustrations

For the purpose of this paper, the verbatim descriptions of readings, that is, what in a conventional therapy is called a process recording, have been omitted, and only the subjects' concerns and their respective feedback are presented below. However, in the concluding remarks, I will have made references to both the content of some readings and the contextual background on which the content surfaced.

All names have been changed.

### Case 1.

Michael, white professional male, 40 years old

**(1)** Relationship problem. **(2)** To gain insight into future and significant others, to interpret behaviour, focus on solutions. **(3)** Yes, the reading was very, very true. I was able to better understand the reason for past behaviours and self-defeating actions and how to enable more self-fulfilling actions. The reading was focused on positive outcomes through positive actions. **(4)** Yes, because the explanations that we have discussed helped me to better understand how to solve problems in an interpretive way. **(5)** Yes, in helping to work on solutions. Also to help me understand how to let go and be confident that everything will work out as long as I am willing to take even small risks, knowing that the failure is only temporary.

Key to all subjects' self-reports as a follow-up of a reading session: **(1)** Main reason for the reading. **(2)** Purpose of the reading. **(3)** Did this reading contribute to achieving your purpose? **(4)** Do you want a follow-up session? **(5)** Was this reading significant and meaningful?

**Case 2.** Lola, white professional female, 30 years old

**(1)** Professional problem, creating own project. **(2)** To gain insight into myself, into the present development of the project and into the future outcome; to clarify issues, to focus on solutions and to find out what is making me resist and keeping from manifesting the project. **(3)** Yes. I gained insight into what is restricting me in achieving my goals, namely fear and confusion in my specific intentions with the project. **(4)** Yes, I want to find out more. **(5)** Yes. I gained some clarity on where to focus my attention in seeing my project through as of today. I understood how the Tarot works as a tool of self-discovery which, along with psychology, allows for more personal issues to come out and be pinpointed for future discoveries.

**Case 3.** Omar, black professional male, 40 years old

**(1)** No particular problem. Just always interested in the science of Tarot and curious about personal readings. **(2)** To gain insight into past, present and future; into myself and significant others and to find out more about Tarot. **(3)** Yes, gave me some insight on my attitude and ways of thinking on certain issues that are important to me. **(4)** Yes. Accuracy of statements just increased my curiosity. **(5)** Yes. I got much out of it. great session. Got some good feedback that will allow me to take a clearer path to things.

**Case 4.** Sam, white professional male, 40 years old

**(1)** Professional problem. **(2)** To gain insight into future regarding career, to focus on solutions and to find out more about Tarot. **(3)** Partially. **(4)** Yes. The reading pinpointed several issues in my life. **(5)** Yes. I really enjoyed the reading. It made me nervous when it hit emotional nerves.

**Case 5.** Lina, black professional female, 30 years old

**(1)** Professional problem. Job and responsibilities. **(2)** To gain insight into future endeavours, to clarify issues. **(3)** Yes. The reading supported my beliefs. **(4)** Not sure. I am satisfied with the reading. I may want to see if anything has changed. **(5)** Yes. Quite a bit of information that I got from the reading I can agree with it and it gives me a clearer picture of myself. The reading was very informative and it gave me a new appreciation for this type of talent.

**Case 6.** Marina, white professional female, 30 years old

**(1)** Relationship problem. **(2)** To gain insight into present, future, myself and significant others; to clarify issues, to gain self-understanding and to mark this period with the structure and validation of Tarot. **(3)** Yes, it allowed me to conceptualize the polarities in a way that I can use to help myself grow and gain heart ... and to the next cycle. **(4)** Yes, to continue the Tarot clarification as I move into the new cycle. **(5)** Yes. Very helpful! It redeemed me from the state of shock and promoted my strength. This is an important and skilled work. A much needed type of guidance and counselling that is multifaceted engagement of the psyche.

**Case 7.** Renata, white professional female, 40 years old

**(1)** Professional problem. I want to organize my life. **(2)** To gain insight into present, future, myself and into the best choices for me; to clarify issues, to focus on solutions and become aware of road signs – see deeper into what is in front of me. **(3)** Yes. I got information about approaching life at this time – involving meditation and accepting that which comes in front of me. **(4)** Yes, I enjoyed these insights. **(5)** Yes. I got clear answers regarding actions to take. What a wonderful opportunity.

**Case 8.** Pam, white professional female, 40 years old

**(1)** Professional problem, concerning my career options and further advancement in my pursuits. **(2)** To gain insight into present, future, myself and significant others; to focus on solutions and to feel empowered, to gain self-understanding. **(3)** Yes, I feel validated in my concerns, and supported in other areas where I questioned my perceptions. **(4)** Yes, I feel the reading was very relevant to me today, and included several things that I have been dealing with in the last 24 hours! **(5)** Yes – the information about: concern for the lost child (miscarriage about 4 years ago); interaction with female (argument); female guiding me (my grandmother); whichever course I take will be attainable through need to be step-by-step... I loved the reading!

**Case 9.** Ross (Pam's husband), white professional male, 40 plus years old

**(1)** Professional problem – seeking assistance in the Master thesis project. **(2)** To gain insight into future and to gain self-understanding. **(3)** Yes. My feelings that I am making a correct choice, have been positively reinforced. **(4)** Not sure as I am still sifting through my thoughts and reactions. **(5)** Yes. It was specific enough to align itself with my thoughts and concerns. I feel comfortable with this reading and the personality which, I feel, manifests itself. And I do not feel that there is a search for earthly reward, it is not easily explained...

**Case 10.** Donna, white professional female, 40 plus years old

**(1)** Professional problem – a choice in the direction in my profession. **(2)** To gain insight into the future; to feel empowered. **(3)** Yes. I gained understanding that I need to go towards my talents. **(4)** No, it won't be necessary because whatever is within me will come through. **(5)** Yes. It validated my belief in my art. It was a great reading.

**Case 11.** Tess, white professional female, about 30 years old

**(1)** Personal problem – lack of a relationship. **(2)** To gain insight into past, present and future; into myself, to focus on solutions and to gain self-understanding. **(3)** Yes. The reading was very ON. It talked about how some past issues and social climbing have interfered with allowing men to enter my life. **(4)** Yes, but not before 6 months to 1 year period. **(5)** Yes. It gave me insight and made me look at some powerful issues that I have been avoiding. I really enjoyed the reading. I hope I will be able to grow spiritually from this experience.

**Case 12.** Rodney, white professional male, a graduate student, 40 plus years old

**(1)** Personal problem. I would like more insight into my style of relating and connecting with others. **(2)** To gain insight into future and to gain self-understanding. **(3)** Not sure. Ideally, I would like a meaningful clue as to why so many of my daily interactions are full of an irrational sense of tension – that each transaction may either be glorious or disastrous. I don't think I got any new information or insights but some previously identified issues (for me) may have been framed in a usefully different perspective. I want to see how I feel about the reading in a day or two. **(4)** No, right now my sense is that nothing said in the reading resonated powerfully enough to justify further explorations in this direction. **(5)** Not sure. If tomorrow something meaningful stirs in me as a result of this reading, it will have been meaningful. But my sense is that a perceptive person ... who uses any of many different available techniques for stirring up psychological issues ... would very likely have covered similar issues. In other words, the issues discussed were more dependent on my openness and your perceptivity than on the cards... It is thought provoking but I am still sceptical about its validity. I have recently finished a class on psychological testing. One thing I learned is that though many tests are seriously flawed, they still have value in bringing out otherwise hidden issues. Tarot cards, whatever their objective validity might be, certainly seem to have the potential of bringing out or stirring up otherwise hidden issues.

**Case 13.** Gordana (Rodney's girlfriend), a Latino female, PhD, about 40 years old

**(1)** Personal and relationship – a desire to have a family with children. **(2)** To gain insight into my present and future: if I gain insight into my present situation, my future will be better. I also want to gain self-understanding, to get counselling and to find out more about Tarot. **(3)** Partially. Several of the characteristics of my situation that came out of the reading were known to me. The suggestion that being more feminine is a necessary step for me to achieve, and the prediction of a major transformation in the future are new to me – I wonder about their validity. **(4)** Not sure. I need some time to find out if what came out helps me, and I find new information I got from it, valid. **(5)** Yes. It was an interesting experience. I am open to consider the suggestions and possible insight that came out of it. I will be able to judge the validity of the method by seeing how my personal life develops. I will remember this conversation and will see if what came out helps me in my future choices.

**Case 14.** Cathy, white professional female, 40 years old

**(1)** Personal and professional problem – both. **(2)** To gain insight into past, present, future and myself, to analyse feelings, to clarify issues and to find out more about Tarot. I heard about Tarot and wanted to try. **(3)** Yes, I was a little sceptical before but now I believe more in Tarot because it was true for me. I live with my parents and my boyfriend. My father and boyfriend are verbally abusive, and my mother usually agrees with them.... My situation was in the cards. **(4)** Not sure – I just do not know what it would entail. **(5)** Yes. It was interesting and verified what I have been told by my therapist.

**Case 15.** Anita, black female, 30 plus years old

**(1)** Personal problem – a family/financial situation; also interested to know if a reading would reflect on my husband as he is the main concern. **(2)** To gain insight into the present, future and significant others; to focus on solutions and to feel empowered. **(3)** Yes. It was very insightful in how my behaviour affects feeling of spouse. **(4)** Not sure. The reading was very positive. **(5)** Yes. I do feel empowered by a very simple message from Tarot.

## Concluding remarks

Arcanum (or arcana, plural) means that which is necessary to know, to discover, so as to be fruitful and creative in one's possible endeavours. If and when discovered – that is, made manifest in a client's conscious awareness – it may become a powerful motivational force to facilitate a change for the better at the emotional, cognitive and/or behavioural levels and thus to accomplish an important therapeutic objective.

I would like to stress that when collecting therapeutic material as per the aforementioned sessions, the process of discovery that was taking place as each reading progressed occurred for both my subjects and me as a therapist. I was not only interpreting cards for my subjects: I found myself engaged in discussing the emergent meanings with them. A therapeutic relationship thus became one of an equal and collaborative partnership, as advocated, for example, by the interpersonal approach to psychotherapy (Teyber, 1992) that implies understanding a client as a crucial condition of establishing a collaborative relationship.

The awakening, the bit of insight that the interpretation triggered in the subjects' minds, happened to be the most natural intervention during the sessions. I was not the source of it: it was rising up from the depth of a client's unconscious, which – as aligned with the Jungian collective unconscious – acquired the power of transcending itself, that is, being elevated to the level of conscious awareness. For example, in case 15, when the 'The Emperor' appeared in Anita's spread, it conveyed the message of Anita's husband having been overwhelmed with the issues of power and control as though his psyche were governed by the archetype of the Father. This triggered Anita's mentioning that her father-in-law had passed away recently and after that everything seemed to go downhill in her family, including her husband's inability to get a job (a fact that also surfaced in the reading). So the stress her husband was under originated after he experienced a major loss. The superego of the

Emperor started to possess him, destroying the balance and equilibrium in his psyche and evidently the homeostasis in the family. This link was perceived by Anita as a result of 'connecting the dots' during her reading. Healing of her own psyche started to take place as she became able to link the seemingly disparate events and to make sense out of the disorderly and confusing thoughts and emotions. Anita, feeling that her worries were becoming healed, was able to experience empowerment, as she stated on the questionnaire, thereby demonstrating an important therapeutic objective.

Interpretation indeed was secondary to the therapeutic material that became explicit due to the initial trigger-function of the interpretation as such. The amplifying and feedback qualities of the Tarot system can create meaning for the mind's patterns.<sup>4</sup> Tarot performs an instrumental function by means of which the mind becomes capable of looking down on its own dynamics, making it accessible to consciousness (cf. Thelen and Smith, 1995). A pattern is capable of portraying its own meaning (cf. Jung, 1972). Some readings in this study have demonstrated the features of MMPI, especially in the case of a client showing the presence of some degree of resistance. For example, Rodney's (case 12) personality type 'showed off' during his session, notwithstanding itself having presented a problem, quite ironically, in the first place. His layout displayed some repeated behavioural patterns reflected in his interpersonal relationships as per particular cards. Despite his possible passive-aggressive personality disorder that could not have been ruled out, his own a posteriori answers to the questionnaire validated the Tarot message that was central in his reading: a previous lesson has not been learned nor a life-task completed. In case 14, Cathy's analysis not only revealed forces affecting her present situation but went much deeper, uncovering some issues of childhood abuse. Cathy's reading demonstrated an example of a brief yet depth-oriented therapy (Ecker and Hulley, 1996), the reason for that being the absolute necessity for Cathy to get out of the

vicious circle as soon as possible. I am convinced that it was indeed the synchronicity principle that motivated Cathy to seek an alternative to her earlier four-year-long conventional therapy. A single reading session resurfaced some hidden causes for the issues that she was continuously discussing in her therapy, thus enlarging Cathy's understanding of them and providing the much needed opportunity for healing.

Marina (case 6), whose individual self has been slowly fusing with her spouse's strong ego, actually went through catharsis – the breaking down of 'The Tower' – during her session. As she herself indicated on the questionnaire, she was able to get out of the state of shock. The reading went even deeper into the very foundation for such a state being the combination of her spouse's double-bind tactics and her own separation anxiety and fear of abandonment. 'The Tower' card indicates a rapid even if painful rising of consciousness, and Marina was able to start healing her broken heart as well as to begin choosing actions that would have been unthinkable for her prior to this reading. In case 11, Tess's psyche could not deal with some past issues, yet Tarot reminded her about them by bringing those issues to her attention – and doing it gently, with all the care of a healer. Tess cried during her reading but together with her tears the old pain was leaving her, thereby freeing up room for new cognitions, new feelings, new experiences. The warning function of the Tarot demonstrated itself in case 1 (Michael) and case 4 (Sam). For Sam, however, the inevitability of karmic change and transformation ('The Death') was complicated by a conformist tendency in his character and issues of co-dependency ('The Devil'). No wonder his response was that Tarot 'hit emotional nerves': such a Gestalt intervention or the awakening of feelings was needed for Sam to get out of denial. For Ross (case 9), whose layout revealed his being in the midst of a particular conflict to the extent of even having projected his depression onto significant others (reflected also in the layout in case 8 for his wife Pam), Tarot provided a timely encouragement and supported Ross's choice of changing career directions.

Moving from a qualitative to a quantitative assessment within this sample, 80% answered 'Yes' to the question of whether the reading contributed to achieving their individual purpose; 7% answered 'Partially', and 13% answered 'Not sure'; no one said 'No'; 93% answered 'Yes' to the question of whether the reading was meaningful and significant, 7% said 'Not sure', no one said 'No'. These data, albeit indirectly, have addressed an issue of paramount importance: validity. A valid psychological test, by definition, measures what it is supposed to measure. Although not a 'test' in a strict sense, the Tarot – by virtue of serving the function of a projective tool – demonstrated its own validity, if not yet in statistical terms then in humanistic ones. Is it possible to make an inference from the findings toward a target population? With regard to the critical question of selecting a sample, the randomness criterion has been satisfied: the subjects, who responded to my advertisement, willingly 'subjected' themselves for participation in this research. Their feedback satisfied the criterion of a specific approach when people may be considered to be the somewhat imperfect measuring devices of their own mental processes and use their own self-reflection and their reports as data (Ericsson and Simon, 1984).

During readings, a client's affective world, when amplified and reflected back, becomes an important step in the process of change because she is not just talking about feelings but experiencing them first hand (cf. Teyber, 1992). Expert readings combine a deep analysis with an intense relationship, and the relational model of psychotherapy may be considered a means to reinforce the concept of Tarot because of the subjects themselves becoming active participants in the process. The task of psychotherapy is indeed not to stay outside the unfolding mind (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983). The psychoanalytic objective of making the unconscious conscious is addressed during readings when the Tarot functions as a discursive, even if extra-linguistic, modality so as to 'articulate' the material that a client either is not willing (consciously) or is unable

(unconsciously) to verbalize. The knowledge of the pictorial language ‘spoken’ by the Tarot is crucial for ‘cracking’ its code and understanding psychodynamic processes that long for interpretation and meaning-making.

Anticipating a prefatory critique associated with a non-traditional research approach and further ‘corrupted’ by a highly controversial subject-matter, I expect not to be able to answer in full detail questions of the type why Tarot is not doing *a* and *b*, or how is it that Tarot is capable of performing *c* and *d*, or whether the Tarot will ever be able to pass a Turing test just like another ‘thinking machine’. Well, it might not indeed. But, on a serious note, it did demonstrate an inclination to meaningful communication – via the mind of a reader –

and its therapeutic value for the clients. It did empower subjects with new information as a source of potential knowledge and emotional healing leading to a possible therapeutic change. And if as yet there is a huge *terra incognita* with regard to Tarot, may I say, paraphrasing Darwin (and Dennett, for that matter<sup>5</sup>): I just couldn’t get here from there in the time available.

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## Notes

1. The support for this somewhat esoteric claim may come from the ‘strong empirical evidence (I repeat – strong empirical evidence) that no local realistic theory is true of our world’ (Jarett, 1989, p. 68). See Semetsky (2000, 2001, 2004b) for some relevant philosophical explorations and implications.
2. From a researcher’s third-person perspective, as well as from a philosophical standpoint, it is indeed imperative to form a hypothesis of how such an insight might take place. See, e.g. Semetsky (2004b, 2005).
3. See Semetsky (2003) on the subject of the so-called memory of the future.
4. And the fact that there are indeed such dynamic patterns is recognized by modern science. See, e.g., Scott Kelso (1995).
5. See Dennett (1995).

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*One learns from many people. There is no one right path for everyone and no ideal way to grow and become. If you remember that you are looking for the most of yourself you can find and that this is a task for adults, you will be able to smile sadly as the spiritual athletes (a far cry from the medieval monastics, who termed themselves the ‘athletes of God’) chase the baubles of status, the myth of ‘enlightenment’, and the hope of something for nothing, from one perfect master to another.*

Larry LeShan

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