

Symbolic Projection Tools in Adolescent Counselling: The Animal Gate and Desert Path Protocols

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces two symbolic projection tools—The Animal Gate and the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)—as structured therapeutic methods for surfacing self-concept, relational beliefs, and identity fragments through guided metaphor. Adolescents often resist traditional talk therapy due to defensiveness, mistrust of authority, and difficulty articulating emotional states. Derived from popular psychology frameworks such as Kokology and refined within the Myth-Tech therapeutic model, these tools provide a low-resistance, high-engagement approach that leverages imaginal content for therapeutic insight and narrative transformation. While symbolic projection tools like guided imagery and metaphor have long been acknowledged in play therapy and psychodynamic contexts, there is currently no formalised system that integrates these methods into a repeatable, modular framework. Existing models do not apply such tools within a narrative identity reconstruction system like Myth-Tech, nor do they adapt easily to adolescents who are resistant to conventional therapy. Furthermore, most approaches rely on therapist-driven interpretation rather than privileging client-led authorship. There is also a lack of non-clinical but functionally diagnostic systems designed to map relational, sovereign, and archetypal identity structures through symbolic means. This paper addresses that gap by introducing two tools—Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) and DPST—as adolescent-friendly, narrative-based interventions embedded within the Modular Myth Engine Live-action Dashboard (MMELD). Drawing from school-based counselling sessions, the paper demonstrates how these metaphoric protocols can bypass resistance, foster emotional insight, and support identity integration through structured symbolic reframing. Ultimately, these tools offer a novel symbolic diagnostic framework for adolescent counselling grounded in the restoration of narrative agency and client-generated meaning.

Key terms: Animal gate, Desert Path Sovereignty Test, symbolic projection tools.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents often resist traditional talk therapy not due to clinical deficiency but because of developmental defensiveness, relational mistrust, and difficulty articulating emotion when under perceived scrutiny (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2015). While direct inquiry may lead to narrative shutdown or sarcasm, these same clients frequently respond with unexpected emotional clarity when engaged through metaphor, symbol, and story.

Despite the longstanding use of metaphor and projection in psychodynamic and play therapy, the field lacks a formally systematised framework that:

- Integrates symbolic projection tools into repeatable interventions
- Maps them within a cohesive narrative identity model
- Adapts them for adolescents without imposing interpretive control
- Offers symbolic diagnostics without crossing into clinical overreach

Current symbolic practices—such as Feinstein and Krippner's (2006) energy-symbolic coherence, Dunne's (2016) narrative-developmental work, and Denborough's (2014) externalisation practices provide valuable elements but remain fragmented. As Fernandez-Borsot (2024) notes, transpersonal therapy remains in conceptual drift due to the absence of unified models for symbolic integration.

This paper introduces two symbolic projection tools—the Animal Gate and the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)—designed specifically for adolescents who resist conventional therapy. Though loosely inspired by Kokology-style exercises, these tools have been refined into structured symbolic diagnostics within the Myth-Tech framework: a therapeutic system that treats identity as a living architecture of inner myth, role, and ritual.

At the core of this model is the Psyche-Myth Architecture (PMA), which conceptualises the psyche as a mythically organised symbolic ecosystem. The applied layer, Modular Myth Engine Live-action Dashboard (MMELD), functions not merely as a narrative metaphor system but as a symbolic

operating interface. It enables real-time deployment of archetypal roles, interpretive rituals, and symbolic mapping tools like DPST and TSP. Unlike existing metaphor-based or storytelling modalities, MMELD is not interpretive by default. It is modular, client-led, repeatable, and minimally invasive—designed to help adolescents surface unconscious identity dilemmas without requiring overt emotional disclosure. This study contributes three key advancements:

1. A novel Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) and DPST system for working with adolescent identity structures using imaginal symbols.
2. A practitioner-tested methodology that enables symbolic insight without interpretation imposition, ensuring narrative sovereignty remains with the client.
3. A proof-of-concept integration of these tools into a structured symbolic framework (Myth-Tech) offers therapists a repeatable model that balances therapeutic creativity with psychological rigour.

Through qualitative case material gathered over 28 sessions with 22 adolescent clients, the paper illustrates how these tools can generate symbolic content that maps onto core dilemmas of self-concept, relational avoidance, and identity fragmentation.

The paper begins by framing the theoretical model (PMA and MMELD) and reviewing relevant symbolic therapies. It then introduces the Animal Gate and DPST tools, explains their operational design, and discusses how projection-based methods work within a sovereign narrative framework.

Following this, three anonymised adolescent case profiles are presented to highlight how these symbolic sequences reliably surface identity tensions in non-threatening, story-driven ways.

The final sections offer a practitioner summary, ethical framing, and suggestions for future empirical study. Rather than offering interpretation, this approach invites the adolescent to author their own meaning within a mythic-symbolic space—restoring voice, coherence, and self-mapping capacity where talk therapy often fails.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Central to MMELD is the concept of the Activated Self-state—an archetypal function such as the Defender, Exile, Diplomat, or Witness. These roles reflect not personality traits but narrative reflexes: mythic modes of emotional processing and relational positioning that can be tracked, re-authored, and strategically activated during therapy.

Myth-Tech itself is a therapeutic framework that integrates ritual, metaphor, identity reconstruction, and symbolic co-authorship. It does not pathologise defences but reframes them as adaptive myths in need of context-sensitive symbolic interpretation. While evidence-based modalities like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) are widely used in adolescent settings, studies show that many youths struggle with their structured, logic-driven demands—especially when experiencing emotional dysregulation, shame, or relational trauma (Kendall et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2007). Choice Theory/Reality Therapy (CTRT) emphasises personal responsibility and behavioural choices but may be perceived as moralising by adolescents facing systemic or familial oppression (Wubbolding, 2011). Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) offers future-oriented dialogue, yet some adolescents feel its rapid reframing bypasses unresolved emotional pain (Franklin et al., 2012). Gestalt therapy, with its emphasis on here-and-now awareness and role-play, can be effective but requires high psychological safety, which many teens resist. Person-Centred Therapy (PCT) promotes unconditional positive regard yet may lack symbolic scaffolding for adolescents who are more engaged by metaphor, story, or gamified interaction.

While Myth-Tech includes advanced modules such as the Erotic Operator's Driver (EOD) for adult clients integrating erotic shame and trauma, EOD is not used with adolescents. The tools presented in this paper—Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) and the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)—are specifically designed as non-erotic symbolic access protocols suitable for youth in school or counselling settings.

Each tool functions as a diagnostic entry point into MMELD (Modular Myth Engine Live-action Dashboard) and is underpinned by PMA (Psyche-Myth Architecture) principles: the symbolic encoding of

internal psychic states, archetypal patterns, and relational narratives. Unlike interpretive techniques that impose meaning from the outside, these protocols privilege the client's own symbolic authorship, offering insight without confrontation.

Symbolic access tools are under-theorised, under-structured, and under-leveraged in modern counselling—particularly with adolescents who resist or reject conventional therapeutic dialogue (Gil, 1994; Moon, 2007). This paper not only demonstrates the power of tools like TSP and DPST but also provides a formal structure for their use and a framework for ethical, playful, and transformative interpretation within a sovereign narrative system.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This paper introduces two symbolic diagnostic tools—TSP and DPST—and demonstrates their use through adolescent case narratives. These tools are non-clinical but structured projection protocols embedded in the Myth-Tech framework, designed to help adolescents explore identity, emotion, and relational patterns without direct confrontation.

This study adopts a qualitative, practitioner-research model within a collaborative autoethnographic frame. The author, a registered counsellor working within Singapore's school system, developed and implemented both protocols over a 24-month period (2023–2025) across individual sessions with students aged 13–17. The data was drawn from 28 sessions (16 using *The Animal Gate*, 12 using *The Desert Path Protocol*) involving clients exhibiting emotional withdrawal, resistance to authority, or narrative inarticulateness. All identifying details have been anonymised, and composite case profiles have been constructed to preserve confidentiality while retaining thematic integrity.

Therapeutic Frame

All sessions were conducted within the broader Myth-Tech therapeutic framework, a symbolic-narrative operating system designed to:

- Restructure personal identity through mythic re-authoring.
- Translate internal states into imaginal constructs.

- Use archetypal motifs to process trauma, grief, or shame.

The protocols described in this paper serve as front-end access points within this framework, functioning diagnostically and as rapport-building instruments.

This study employed purposive sampling within a school-based counselling context, selecting clients who demonstrated emotional defensiveness, relational mistrust, or narrative avoidance—traits that typically resist conventional talk therapy.

The Animal Gate Protocol

The client is asked to list three favourite animals in order and provide a spontaneous "why" for each choice. After the initial list is generated, the therapist introduces the interpretive mapping:

- First animal = How others see you
- Second animal = How you see yourself
- Third animal = Who you really are.

The therapist then holds space for client-led interpretation, using open-ended prompts to invite reflection or clarification without directing or correcting meanings. This creates a low-stakes symbolic frame for identity exploration, shadow work, and persona differentiation.

The Desert Path Protocol

A guided symbolic imagery journey is initiated with this prompt:

“Imagine you're walking through a desert. As you walk, you see these things—just answer naturally.”

The client is asked to respond to six symbolic encounters:

1. A box – Describe its look, size, and material.
2. Inside the box – What’s in it?
3. A ladder – Do you climb it or ignore it?
4. A mirror – What do you do with it?
5. A horse – Describe it.
6. Flowers – What kind? How many? Where are they?

Each element maps onto an emotional-symbolic construct:

Table 1: Element Maps onto an Emotional-Symbolic Construct

Symbol	Interpretive Domain
Box	Self-concept, identity boundaries
Inside	Hidden truths, emotional content
Ladder	Ambition, spiritual direction
Mirror	Self-confrontation, reflection
Horse	Ideal partner, relational model
Flowers	Legacy, what the client nurtures

Interpretation is co-constructed. Clients are invited to assign meaning, with the therapist offering symbolic anchoring or mythic parallels where needed (e.g., Jungian, archetypal, or culturally resonant myths). Responses are recorded for thematic coding and narrative integration in later sessions.

Position within Clinical Context

The protocols described in this paper serve as front-end access points within this framework, functioning diagnostically and as rapport-building instruments. The symbolic tools presented in this paper—Tri-Form

Symbol Projection (TSP) and the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)—are designed to complement, not replace, formal clinical interventions. While they do not meet the criteria for diagnostic assessment or structured psychometric evaluation, they offer a non-clinical yet therapeutically structured approach that enables clients—particularly adolescents—to engage meaningfully with symbolic content when conventional talk therapy proves inaccessible or confrontational. Adapted from culturally familiar formats like Kokology, these tools are not used to assign psychological meaning or

pathology but to facilitate self-authored projection in a playful, low-resistance frame. When framed ethically—as metaphor-based discovery rather than interpretation—their use aligns with therapeutic guidelines for expressive techniques. While Kokology originated in 1990s pop psychology, its core method—eliciting unconscious themes through narrative metaphor—remains relevant when embedded in structured therapeutic systems. By updating and integrating its mechanisms within the MMELD framework, we retain its accessibility while expanding its interpretive depth and symbolic precision. Though Kokology itself may be seen by some as dated or informal, in this paper, it is reframed not as content but as delivery format—updated and recontextualised within the Myth-Tech framework as part of a modular symbolic system grounded in narrative structure, emotional access, and archetypal mapping.

When to Use:

Use Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) or the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST) during early-stage sessions to establish rapport, bypass resistance, or access emotional material when traditional dialogue stalls. These tools are especially helpful during first contact, narrative-blocked sessions, or as transitional bridges into deeper work.

Client Profiles That Benefit

Ideal for adolescents who:

- Resist direct emotional inquiry
- Present with shame, defensiveness, or relational mistrust
- Prefer gamified, metaphor-based, or story-driven interaction
- Struggle with verbal expression or therapeutic engagement

Session Time Required:

Each protocol typically takes 15–30 minutes, including reflection and spontaneous interpretation. It can be extended across two sessions if deeper symbolic integration is desired.

Training Requirements / Therapist Posture:

No formal certification is required, but practitioners must adopt a non-directive, interpretive-humble stance.

- Training in narrative therapy, imaginal methods, or expressive arts is beneficial.
- Therapists should avoid imposing symbolic meaning and instead facilitate client-led authorship, gently offering symbolic anchors only when clients request clarification or show interpretive distress.

Evidence Basis and Research Design

This paper adopts a qualitative, practitioner-research methodology rooted in collaborative autoethnography. The tools discussed—TSP and DPST—are not evaluated through empirical standardisation but through pattern resonance, thematic consistency across sessions, and observed shifts in client affect engagement and narrative coherence. The emphasis is not on diagnostic reliability but on therapeutic utility: the capacity of these symbolic tools to elicit meaningful self-insight and emotional movement. While the current data reflects practitioner-generated field observations within school-based settings, future empirical studies are recommended to assess replicability, cross-cultural utility, and outcome measurement across broader populations.

Data Collection & Analysis

Although the tools were administered through guided imaginal sequences, therapist field notes were later coded using **open thematic analysis**, consistent with qualitative symbolic research practices. Field notes were taken immediately after sessions, including verbatim excerpts, observed affect, and spontaneous symbolic themes. Sessions were coded for:

- Client engagement level
- Emergent metaphors
- Shifts in emotional tone
- Symbol re-use in later sessions
- Self-authored interpretations

The thematic analysis focused on how symbolic responses predicted therapeutic access points, relational transference, or resistance styles. Sessions were not transcribed verbatim to protect privacy but reconstructed into anonymised composites. The following case profiles illustrate how DPST and TSP symbol sets surface identity dilemmas, emotional defences, and symbolic longing in adolescent clients.

Table 2: Session Overview

Client Pseudonym	Age	Presenting Concern	Tool Used	Outcome Indicator
Dusty Boh	16	Aggression, school fights, cyber-scaming, sexual risk-taking; father deceased, mother overworked	Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST), Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP)	The shift in posture and tone when discussing "buried softness" in the box; visible emotional release, and long pause after interpreting flowers
Aaron Tan	15	Hyper-defensiveness, explosive reactions to correction, inflated ego defences masking shame	Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)	Prolonged silence and softened voice after describing the velvet-sheathed sword and injured horse; admitted confusion, which broke his usual insistence on being "right."
Vanita	14	Claims of invalidation, emotional neglect, peer rejection, possible maternal abuse	Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST), Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP)	Whispered reinterpretation of herself as a flower ("just... bloom anyway"); a noticeable sigh of relief, softer affect, and reduced facial tension

Symbolic Projection Case Summaries

Dusty (16): "No one waters me either."

Dusty presented with aggressive behaviour, cyber-scaming, and emotional flatness. Through the *Desert Path Sovereignty Test*, he described his self-concept as a "metal ammo crate—scratched, locked," symbolising a hardened, guarded persona. Inside it was "one bullet," which he interpreted as a last-resort

resource—"either I've got nothing left... or one last shot." This reframing of emotional survival as weaponised endurance revealed both despair and grit.

He refused to climb the ladder, saying, "Climb it and what? Fall harder." This cynicism reflected a collapsed ambition narrative and a defensive rejection of hope. When asked about the mirror, Dusty said, "I look once,

then smash it,” explaining that “mirror’s full of lies anyway.” This indicated not denial but a deep distrust of self-reflection—what might be seen if the guard dropped.

His horse—“big, black, stares at me like it knows me”—was never touched. “Maybe that’s what I want. Someone who doesn’t try to fix me... just stands there. Solid.” The flowers, however, were dead and sunburnt. “Nothing grows in my world,” he muttered. “No one waters me either.”

His symbolic landscape—locked, scorched, armoured—mapped directly onto an inner life built on survival without expectation of nurturance or repair. Yet his articulation of these metaphors showed cognitive insight and readiness for re-symbolisation.

Aaron (15): “I buried him. Nobody came to the funeral.”

Aaron was intellectually sharp but emotionally defended, often reactive to correction and locked in moral absolutism. When he encountered the box, he described it as “black titanium... cracked, sealed with a biometric lock.” He paused, then reflected: “I think I’m meant to be indestructible. But something got in... and now I can’t open it.” This statement—“I’m locked out of myself”—became a pivotal insight into his hidden grief and internal confusion.

Inside the box, he saw “a sword, wrapped in velvet,” describing it as “my authority... I wrap it up so no one gets cut.” This metaphor externalised both fear of emotional violence and repression of agency—he has power but hides it to avoid harm.

Notably, he chose to climb the obsidian ladder, which elevated him to a “different plane.” On this higher symbolic level, he encountered a mirror that showed “who I was before I hardened.” Rather than reject or destroy the image, Aaron bowed to it: “Like a tomb. I honor him, but I can’t afford to be him again. He got hurt.”

His ideal partner—the horse—was armoured and obedient. “If they’re loyal, I won’t get betrayed. If they’re armoured, they won’t break from being near me.” The flowers, meanwhile, were frozen in a glass dome. “I preserve things. If I tried to grow them, I’d ruin them.”

Aaron’s imagery expressed a paradox: deep yearning for connection alongside an existential fear of damage—either to others or from them. His symbolic gestures (bowing to the mirror, not touching the flowers) revealed a mythic grief: not of loss alone, but of exiled selfhood.

Vanita (14): “Maybe I want to be one of them. Just... bloom anyway.”

Vanita, soft-spoken and withdrawn, described ongoing maternal anger, racial microaggressions, and a loss of internal validation. When prompted to imagine her box, she saw a “sky-blue wooden chest, carved with stars and birds,” reflecting a desire to be gentle, special, and non-threatening. Inside was a jasmine-scented scarf and a photo of her cousin: “memories of when people smiled at me... I don’t have it anymore.” Her symbols signified a preserved softness, now inaccessible.

She chose not to climb the ladder. “I just sit under it,” she said. “I don’t think I’m ready.” The mirror was cracked; she looked at it “with one eye closed.” “If I see everything, I’ll hate it,” she whispered, “but I don’t want to break it either.” These metaphors suggested a fragile sense of self—tentatively held, not yet ready for full confrontation.

Her horse was white, braided, gentle. “It comes close, but I wave. If I touch it, I might ruin it.” Her relational longing was clear: she desired connection but feared contamination as if her presence were inherently destructive.

Finally, the flowers were wild and purple—blooming without permission. “Maybe... I want to grow something that doesn’t need to be told it’s allowed to exist.” Tearfully, she added: “Maybe I want to be one of them. Just... bloom anyway.”

This single sentence carried the emotional weight of her entire projection set. It was not just a symbol of resilience—it was a reclamation of existential legitimacy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Symbolic Themes Across Clients

This section presents thematic interpretations of the six recurring symbolic elements used in the Desert

Path Sovereignty Test (DPST) based on responses from three anonymised adolescent clients: Dusty, Aaron, and Vanita. While individual metaphors varied in detail, shared symbolic patterns emerged—each revealing unique aspects of emotional processing, identity fragmentation, and relational orientation.

Theme 1: The Box – Self-Concept and Boundaries

Across all three cases, the symbolic box was experienced as partially or fully inaccessible. For Dusty, it appeared cracked and unstable; for Aaron, locked and impenetrable; and for Vanita, closed yet emotionally inviting. These representations paralleled each client's primary emotional defence: Dusty relied on aggression to mask vulnerability, Aaron constructed a rational and shame-armoured persona, and Vanita defaulted to softness and appeasement.

The pivotal insight emerged when Aaron articulated, "I'm locked out of myself"—a moment that exposed a deeper grief not about how others perceived him but about his own inaccessibility to his inner life.

Theme 2: Inside the Box – Hidden Truths and Emotional Core

Each box contained a single emotionally significant item. These were not numerous or overwhelming but instead represented scarcity and emotional economy. Their symbolic preservation—rather than active use—suggested suppressed readiness or long-delayed integration.

Vanita's reflection captured this poignantly: "I keep that memory because I don't have it anymore." Her statement reflected a clear confrontation with emotional loss and a quiet yearning for the safety and love that memory once represented.

Theme 3: The Ladder – Aspiration and Spiritual Orientation

The ladder, interpreted as a symbol of ambition, spiritual striving, or future self, revealed each client's posture toward transcendence. Dusty dismissed the ladder entirely, reflecting cynical disengagement. Aaron positioned himself above others, viewing the ladder as a route to escape vulnerability. Vanita

viewed it as distant and exhausting, expressing fatigued hesitation rather than outright rejection.

In Dusty's case, the absence of an emotional shift suggested a missed opportunity for insight. A proposed follow-up Kokology-style question—"If you were stranded on a remote island, what three items would you bring and why?"—may help access his latent values or survival logic.

Theme 4: The Mirror – Self-Confrontation and Identity Loss

The mirror consistently triggered avoidance and emotional withdrawal. Clients either bypassed or recoiled from their reflections, signalling fear of collapse, regression, or grief for a past self. Aaron's statement stood out: "I honour the self I used to be, but I can't afford to be him again. He got hurt." His insight reframed what appeared to be pride as a form of emotional burial—a protective refusal to resurrect a vulnerable identity.

Theme 5: The Horse – Intimacy and Erotic Symbolism

The horse, representing an idealised connection, power, or intimacy, was approached with ambivalence by all three clients. None physically touched the horse, fearing harm to the creature or rejection of their approach. This symbolic distance mirrored anxieties about relational vulnerability.

Vanita's phrase—"I want it to stay, but I think if I touch it, I'll ruin it"—encapsulated internalised shame around closeness, intimacy, and self-worth.

Theme 6: The Flowers – Legacy, Expression, and Future Self

When asked to describe the flowers at the journey's end—commonly interpreted as symbols of legacy or authentic expression—each client responded with restraint. Dusty envisioned scorched earth and dying petals, signalling a belief in inevitable failure. Aaron described delicate blooms he feared he might harm. Vanita, in contrast, yearned for unapologetic self-expression, ending her session with a quiet affirmation: "Maybe I want to be one of them. Just... bloom anyway." Her insight marked a shift from permission-seeking to quiet defiance.

Table 3: Summary Table: Symbolic Themes and Client Resonance

Symbol	Thematic Meaning	Dusty	Aaron	Vanita
Box	Self-concept & Boundaries	Cracked, chaotic	Locked, impenetrable	Closed, gentle containment
Inside Box	Emotional core / hidden truth	Withheld	Preserved item	Memory of lost love
Ladder	Aspiration/transcendence	Rejected	Elevation to superiority	Hesitant, weary
Mirror	Identity confrontation	Avoided	Honored past self, buried pain	Feared regression
Horse	Erotic or relational ideal	Feared proximity	Observed, untouchable	Longed for but feared intimacy
Flowers	Legacy and future expression	Scorched potential	Fear of damaging growth	Yearning for full expression

Final Insights

- These adolescents are not unreachable—they are misinterpreted survivors, each guarding a dormant core.
- The desert path reveals that even the most defiant (Dusty), defended (Aaron), or defeated (Vanita) still long for softness, recognition, and safe connection.
- The symbolic work is not just projection—it becomes ritual storytelling that allows them to access parts of themselves they thought had no place in therapy.

Next Step Suggestion: For Clients Without Aha-Moments

If further reflection is needed, use Kokology-style questions that create emotional-mythic distance while surfacing internal logic:

1. **“You’re given a magic ring that turns you into any animal at will. What animal would you choose, and when would you use it?”**
→ Good for Dusty or Aaron, surfaces role/archetype preference
2. **“You can invite 5 people (real, fictional, alive, dead) to dinner. Who and why?”**
For Vanita, may reveal aspirational connection models and emotional longings
3. **“You wake up on a remote island, and a voice says: You are the only one left. What do you do?”**

→ For all three, reveals core survival programming vs existential fear

Discussion

The results from the Desert Path Protocol sessions with Dusty, Aaron and Vanita highlight the potency of symbolic projection as a diagnostic tool, particularly when integrated within the Myth-Tech therapeutic system. These sessions surfaced identity fragments, relational templates, and emotional defence structures that may remain inaccessible through conventional talk therapy—especially among adolescents with shame defences, emotional avoidance, or resistance to authority.

Symbol as Diagnostic Mirror

Through the lens of Psyche-Myth Architecture (PMA), each object in the Desert Path operates as an externalised glyph encoding an internal state. The box, for example, reflects self-concept and boundaries (e.g., sealed crates, cracked armour, or decorative containers), while the mirror reveals a client's readiness—or refusal—to self-confront without collapse. These are not arbitrary images; they are mythic metaphors rendered through emotional instinct, not logic (Hillman, 1975; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Interpretation in this model initiates a Symbolic Reframing Loop, a Myth-Tech process where projected defences (e.g., Dusty's cockroach identity, Aaron's sword-in-velvet, Vanita's cracked mirror) are

repositioned as adaptive survival myths rather than pathological traits. As Vanita expressed, “*Maybe I want to be one of the flowers. Just... bloom anyway.*” This moment marked a narrative shift from victimhood to sovereign reclamation—metaphor as transformation, not ornament (White & Epston, 1990; Jennings, 1999).

Interpretation and the Operator Ethic

Clients are encouraged to interpret their own symbolic projections. However, when they become cognitively blocked or overwhelmed, the therapist may offer tentative interpretations—not as an authority but as a narrative midwife (Moon, 2007). These moments are grounded not in classical psychoanalysis but in Myth-Tech Symbolism (Ow, 2025). Though the content shares surface features with psychodynamic projection, Myth-Tech avoids defaulting to unconscious drives or pathology (Freud, 1915). Instead, it anchors interpretation in the client’s restoration of narrative agency, emphasising symbolic authorship, identity coherence, and emotional integration (Ow, 2025).

MMELD as Symbolic Deployment Engine

The Modular Myth Engine Live-action Dashboard (MMELD) operates as the real-time symbolic deployment interface within Myth-Tech. Once symbolic projections are surfaced (e.g., a dead flowerbed, a kneeling horse, a shattered mirror), MMELD enables the identification of the relevant

activated therapeutic self-states (e.g., Defender, Exile, Witness) and activates the appropriate narrative transformation arc (Ow, 2025). These sequences are not static metaphors—they are live rituals that enable recursive tracking, integration, and meaning refinement over time (Levine, 2010).

The Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)

The Desert Path Protocol, now formally logged as the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST), is adapted from a guided imagery sequence first popularised in the Kokology series by Tadahiko Nagao and Isamu Saito. Though originally presented as casual introspection, within Myth-Tech, this format has been recalibrated as a symbolic projection engine for mapping identity structure, relational archetypes, and self-worth narratives. Despite its non-clinical origins, the DPST remains effective precisely because it:

- Bypasses conscious resistance
- Feels playful and safe
- Produces metaphor-rich, emotionally resonant content
- Offers non-threatening symbolic containers for deep themes

When used with PMA and MMELD context-sensitive symbolic interpretation, the DPST becomes a therapeutic access ritual rather than a novelty.

Table 4: Each Image Corresponds to a Symbolic Axis in the Adolescent’s Individuation Path

Symbol	Projection Domain	Interpretive Prompts
Box	Self-concept & boundaries	“What does it look like?”
Inside	Inner content/self-worth	“What’s inside?”
Ladder	Ambition/transcendence	“Do you climb it?”
Mirror	Self-confrontation / identity truth	“What do you do with it?”
Horse	Relational/erotic archetype	“Describe the horse.”
Flowers	Legacy/nurturance / future-self	“What kind of flowers?”

This sequence roughly maps a mythic individuation arc:

1. **The Box** – Self-containment
2. **Inside** – Guarded inner truth
3. **The Ladder** – Ambition or escape
4. **The Mirror** – Self-image confrontation
5. **The Horse** – Intimacy projection
6. **The Flowers** – Legacy or potential

In adolescent contexts, DPST and TSP (Tri-Form Symbol Projection)—the renamed Animal Gate protocol—can be slotted into MMELD as diagnostic-entry modules. They serve a different function from EOM (Erotic Operator's Manual) or SIET (Somatic-Imaginal Erotic Therapy), which target erotic trauma integration. In contrast, DPST and TSP are used for symbolic identity scaffolding and self-recognition in developing adolescents.

Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP Protocol)

TSP invites clients to name their three favourite animals, each corresponding to an identity position:

- **First animal** → *How others see me* (external mask)
- **Second animal** → *How I see myself* (narrative self)
- **Third animal** → *Who I really am* (shadow/core archetype)

These rapid-access metaphors bypass shame defences and provide archetypal insight. Interpretation is offered only when the client is stuck; otherwise, the process remains client-led, enhancing both engagement and ownership (Ow, 2025).

Methods and Summary of Findings

This paper employed a qualitative, practitioner-research methodology within a collaborative autoethnographic frame. Symbolic projection tools—Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) and the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)—were administered in a Singapore secondary school context (see Research Design, pg. 23 for session count and participant details). Clients were selected through purposive sampling based on observable emotional resistance, narrative inarticulateness, or relational defensiveness.

Each session was documented using post-session field notes, focusing on symbolic responses, affect shifts, spontaneous interpretation, and emotional breakthroughs. Thematic analysis was conducted across six symbolic categories in DPST (Box, Inside the Box, Ladder, Mirror, Horse, Flowers) and three identity projections in TSP (How others see me, How I see myself, Who I really am). Key findings included:

- **Universal symbolic convergence:** Despite diverse backgrounds, clients consistently produced metaphors that reflected core identity dilemmas—containment vs exposure, loyalty vs fear, self-worth vs shame.
- **Patterns of self-concept defence:** The box was never fully open; it appeared locked, cracked, or decorative. Each inner content item (e.g., sword, bullet, scarf) symbolised dormant emotional truth—often hidden due to trauma or mistrust.
- **Ambition and avoidance:** The ladder was either rejected, climbed with superiority, or avoided out of fatigue. This axis revealed each client's approach to hope, aspiration, or transcendence.
- **Mirror resistance:** All clients avoided full confrontation with the mirror. Some destroyed it (Dusty), some bowed to it (Aaron), some only half-looked (Vanita), illustrating resistance to full self-integration.
- **Intimacy avoidance:** None of the clients touched the horse, even when it represented their ideal partner. Across all cases, this reflected fear of damaging others or being unworthy of safe connection.
- **Legacy and longing:** The flower symbol produced the most emotionally resonant statements. Dead, preserved, or wild, each client projected their longing to nurture something—but feared they lacked permission or capacity to do so.

These findings demonstrate that even clients who resist verbal disclosure are capable of generating emotionally rich, archetypal narratives when given symbolic framing. The tools enabled low-resistance access to high-density emotional content and served as entry points for future therapeutic interventions.

Implications for Practice

The application of symbolic projection tools such as the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST) and Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) within the Myth-Tech framework offers practitioners a practical, low-resistance entry point into deep narrative material—particularly with adolescent populations who are emotionally defended, mistrustful of authority, or struggle with conventional therapeutic dialogue. These tools are not replacements for clinical models but augmentative symbolic diagnostics—informal but structured methods for eliciting metaphor, accessing implicit beliefs, and building therapeutic alliance through imaginative engagement. Their effectiveness lies in their ability to generate meaning from the client's own symbolic language rather than from therapist-directed frameworks.

1. Use with Resistant or Narrative-Avoidant Adolescents

TSP and DPST are particularly effective with clients who:

- Respond poorly to direct emotional inquiry
- Dismiss therapy as irrelevant or controlling
- Present with internalised shame, moral rigidity, or defensive intellect
- Prefer imaginative, metaphorical, or gamified interactions

These projection tools create emotional distance, allowing clients to explore vulnerable material through symbolic metaphor—without the perceived threat of personal exposure or judgment.

2. Framing Matters: Myth-Tech over Interpretation

Practitioners must resist over-psychologising or defaulting to trauma-pathology frameworks. Instead, by anchoring the process within Myth-Tech symbolism—which emphasises sovereign authorship, symbolic reframing, and narrative re-alignment—therapists model a posture of interpretive humility. Interpretation is offered only when the client is emotionally stalled or curious and always in the spirit of co-authorship.

In this approach:

- The therapist becomes a guide, not a decoder

- The client retains interpretive power
- Metaphor becomes a tool for transformation, not diagnosis

3. Integrate within MMELD for Dynamic Case Progression

When integrated into the Modular Myth Engine Live-action Dashboard (MMELD), both TSP and DPST function as symbolic "onboarding modules." They allow the therapist to:

- Identify dominant activated self-states (e.g., Defender, Witness, Exile)
- Surface emotional blind spots (e.g., shame-mirrors, romantic projections)
- Track mythic identity arcs across sessions
- Seed subsequent reframing rituals or interventions

This modular integration enables adaptive deployment—the symbolic content revealed can inform future direction, such as:

- Initiating relational reframing
- Identifying dissociation zones (e.g., smashed mirrors or ignored ladders)
- Designing personalised ritual tasks based on the symbols (e.g., writing a letter to the box, drawing the horse, replanting the flowers)

4. Non-Erotic Plug-In Pathway

While many Myth-Tech tools (e.g., EOD or SIET) are designed for adult erotic-shame integration, the TSP and DPST protocols function as **non-erotic entryways** suitable for:

- Adolescents
- School-based settings
- Intake or rapport-building contexts
- Trauma-informed but not trauma-focused first contact work

These tools offer a psychologically safe, non-pathologising first step into symbolic exploration.

5. Adaptability across Contexts

Symbolic resonance is inherently client-dependent; not all adolescents will respond meaningfully to metaphor,

and the therapist must exercise discernment in its use—especially with clients less familiar with symbolic or narrative frameworks. However, for those immersed in movies, television, graphic novels, or pop culture, the metaphorical language of symbols often creates stronger emotional traction and interpretive access.

While originally developed for adolescent counselling, these protocols are adaptable for diverse populations, including:

- Young adults exploring identity or relational stuckness
- Individuals in spiritual or transitional phases of life
- Groups undergoing rites of passage, leadership training, or creative self-reinvention

The format can be expanded for group workshops, integrated into retreat settings, or translated into art therapy, drama therapy, or journaling modalities.

Therapeutic Anchoring

“Anchoring” typically refers to:

The act of stabilising a symbolic image, emotional state, or projected metaphor so that it becomes therapeutically usable, revisitable, or integrated.

In this paper, “anchoring through client imagery” means:

- Taking the metaphors that the client invents (e.g., Dusty's kneeling horse or Vanita's crushed flowers).
- Giving them narrative weight and therapeutic continuity.
- So that they become emotional landmarks for future sessions or meaning-making.

The horse may reflect an idealised relational partner, the mirror a confrontation with self-truth, and the ladder a symbolic measure of drive or transcendence. These symbols are not fixed in meaning but act as narrative placeholders that can shift based on the adolescent's emotional terrain and self-authoring stance.

Dusty:

Dusty's projection of a weaponised crate and a black stallion kneeling in broken armour reflected not only

his defensive external persona but also an unspoken yearning for dignity and control within the chaos. By framing these symbols through Myth-Tech's Sovereign Reframing protocol, Dusty began to see his volatility not as pathology but as fragmented authorship awaiting reintegration.

Aaron:

Aaron's cracked mirror and sword-wrapped-in-velvet imagery revealed a fragile ego armoured by righteousness—a self that feared correction as an existential threat. The DPST enabled a guided reframing of these symbols into a Defender narrative, allowing therapeutic access without triggering a collapse or shame spiral.

Vanita:

Vanita's dreamlike imagery—a sky-painted box and a delicate horse reaching toward trampled flowers—surfaced quiet grief for lost nurturing and unmet validation. Through gentle symbolic mirroring, she initiated her own re-authorship arc, reclaiming the right to “bloom anyway” despite familial neglect.

Practitioner Takeaway

Symbolic tools such as DPST and TSP endure not because they are formally validated—but because they work. When calibrated through the Myth-Tech system, they evolve from casual metaphors to precise psychological rituals.

The client may walk through a desert in imagination—but what they leave with is a map of the self.

Practitioners attuned to narrative structure, archetypal patterns, and symbolic framing will find these protocols to be both versatile and deeply resonant. In settings where clinical methods stall, these metaphorical pathways may offer the most meaningful access to the psyche.

Positioning Within Therapeutic Praxis and Epistemic Integrity

While the therapeutic models referenced in this paper—PMA (Psyche-Myth Architecture), MMELD (Modular Myth Engine Live-action Dashboard), EOM (Erotic Operator's Manual), and PMM (Personal Myth Mapping)—have been elaborated in separate publications currently under peer review (Ow, 2025), they are presented here in a self-contained manner

sufficient for understanding the symbolic logic and applied method of this protocol. These models were developed to meet the specific clinical demands of working with emotionally avoidant, shame-defended, and narratively disorganised clients, offering a modular and metaphorically fluent approach rooted in client authorship.

Rather than functioning as prescriptive diagnostic systems, these frameworks serve as narrative scaffolds—tools to help therapists track symbolic material across sessions, modulate therapeutic roles responsively, and maintain a consistent interpretive ethos. Their theoretical foundations draw from established traditions in narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), symbolic imagination (Hillman, 1975; Moon, 2007), and metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) but are adapted for contemporary use with adolescent populations where formal psycholinguistic engagement may be inaccessible.

Importantly, the efficacy of these tools does not depend on the reader's prior familiarity with the Myth-Tech system. The symbolic projection methods demonstrated in this paper function independently as therapeutic interventions—and their inclusion here is meant to illustrate a scalable logic of practice, not to insist upon system-wide adoption. Where appropriate, references to PMA or MMELD simply clarify the structural role these symbolic inputs play within a broader arc of narrative identity reconstruction.

This paper does not present Myth-Tech as a replacement for evidence-based clinical interventions, nor does it claim universal efficacy across therapeutic populations. Rather, it offers an emergent framework designed to fill a specific and under-addressed therapeutic gap: the symbolic and narrative access needs of adolescents who resist traditional talk therapy, particularly those who present with shame-based defences, emotional inarticulateness, or oppositional masking (Siegel, 2012; van der Kolk, 2014).

While the tools explored—Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) and Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)—derive structural inspiration from informal projection models like *Kokology*, they are not employed as novelty games. Within Myth-Tech, their repurposing serves a deliberate clinical intention: to bypass

resistance, surface metaphorical truth structures, and restore sovereign authorship without reliance on diagnostic labels or overt interpretation (White & Epston, 1990; Moon, 2007). These sequences are calibrated not for entertainment but for therapeutic resonance, functioning as access portals into archetypal layers of self-narrative (Hillman, 1975; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Some may critique the absence of formal empirical data or randomised control trials; however, this work is intentionally situated in the practice-based evidence paradigm (Green, 2006), aligning with narrative therapy's emphasis on lived experience over symptom reduction (McLeod, 2011; Angus & McLeod, 2004). Our use of case vignettes is not anecdotal but structured—thematic in its extraction, guided by recurrent symbol constellations (e.g., cracked boxes, hidden ladders, armoured horses), echoing grounded theory approaches to meaning-making (Charmaz, 2006). The purpose here is not clinical generalisation but symbolic pattern recognition, narrative coherence, and emotional intelligibility. In this context, qualitative precision holds therapeutic value, particularly in emotionally reactive or developmentally complex populations (Freeman et al., 1997; Cattanach, 2008).

Client-Led Meaning

Furthermore, while Myth-Tech's symbolic architecture may echo Jungian or psychodynamic motifs (Jung, 1964; Winnicott, 1971), it diverges in its operational ethics: therapist interpretations are never presented as truths. Instead, MMELD protocols require the facilitator to scaffold meaning only when the client is cognitively blocked or emotionally flooded—and always using the client's language, not diagnostic terminology (Gil, 1994; Moon, 2007). This safeguards against projection bias and maintains client authorship as central, honouring the narrative therapy ethic of the client as the primary meaning-maker (White & Epston, 1990).

From Tool to Portal

Lastly, the integration of these tools into the Modular Myth Engine Live-action Dashboard (MMELD) distinguishes this framework from symbolic improvisation or metaphor play. MMELD provides structured pathways for activated self-state identification, narrative context-sensitive symbolic

interpretation, and symbolic follow-through across sessions (Ow, 2025a). In this way, Myth-Tech does not compete with modalities like DBT or ACT; it complements them, particularly when standard approaches are met with adolescent resistance or symbolic hunger (Linehan, 1993; Hayes et al., 1999; Malchiodi, 2005).

From Symbol to Sovereignty

In short, this paper is not asking clinicians to abandon the clinical in favour of the mythic. It simply argues that the mythic, when structured symbolically and delivered responsibly, can be clinically useful—even when it emerges from pop-psych roots (Nagao & Saito, 1992). This is not a regression from evidence but a reclamation of therapeutic imagination—harnessed with discipline, purpose, and mythic precision (Jennings, 1999; Levine, 2010).

Toward Future Directions

The findings from this paper do more than validate symbolic projection as a viable engagement strategy—they illuminate a path toward a broader, formalised use of symbolic diagnostics for adolescent counselling. By mapping archetypal content and identity formations through imaginal tools, we enhance therapeutic access and open the door to future research exploring how such projection systems can be scaled, refined, and culturally adapted across diverse clinical and educational contexts. This symbolic groundwork lays the foundation for an expanded Myth-Tech praxis—one that can grow from toolset to paradigm.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has introduced and examined two symbolic projection tools—the Tri-Form Symbol Projection (TSP) and the Desert Path Sovereignty Test (DPST)—as integrated components of the Myth-Tech therapeutic system. Through transcript-based case analysis of adolescent clients, we have demonstrated that these tools are not merely imaginative exercises

or therapeutic novelties but functionally structured mechanisms for accessing identity material that often lies dormant beneath narrative defences.

Our case examples substantiate several key contributions to the field:

- They demonstrate the structural integration of projection tools, adapted from informal pop-psychology formats (e.g., Kokology), into a repeatable, modular framework deployable in live counselling contexts.
- The tools align seamlessly within a narrative identity reconstruction model, leveraging Myth-Tech's PMA and MMELD components to frame emotional and relational material as mythically encoded, not clinically pathologised.
- They have been adapted specifically for adolescent clients who are often resistant to conventional therapeutic dialogue, offering low-stakes access to deep psychological material.
- The exercises are framed to anchor interpretation in client-led authorship, preserving psychological agency and restoration of narrative agency while avoiding interpretive overreach.
- Finally, the system offers a non-clinical yet functionally diagnostic pathway for mapping relational templates, sovereign archetypes, and identity structures in a developmentally sensitive, symbolically resonant format.

In a therapeutic landscape often dominated by cognitive models and symptom-tracking, these tools represent a subtle but significant paradigm shift toward meaning, toward metaphor, and toward the reclamation of narrative as the core structure of selfhood. As the field moves increasingly toward integrative, trauma-informed, and client-centred approaches, tools like TSP and DPST may offer a timely re-entry into the imaginal psyche—where change begins not with correction but with recognition.

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