

Eliciting Metaphor through Clean Language: an Innovation in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The significant, original contribution of this paper is to show how an innovative method of questioning called 'Clean Language' can enhance the authenticity and rigour of interview-based qualitative research. The paper explores the specific potential of Clean Language as a method for eliciting naturally occurring metaphors in order to provide in-depth understanding of a person's symbolic world, and also demonstrates how it can improve qualitative research more widely by addressing the propensity for researchers inadvertently to introduce extraneous metaphors into an interviewee's account at both data collection and interpretation stages. Despite substantial interest in metaphors in the field of organisational and management research there is a lack of explicit, systematic methods for eliciting naturally occurring metaphors. The issue of quality in qualitative methods has also been the subject of continuing debate. In order to explore its potential, Clean Language was used as a method of interviewing in a collaborative academic-practitioner project to elicit the metaphors of six mid-career managers, relating to the way they experienced work-life balance.

Key words

Qualitative methods, metaphor, qualitative interviewing, questions, work-life balance.

Introduction

There has been considerable interest in metaphor in the organisation and management literature (for example, Cassell and Lee, 2012; Cornelissen, 2006; Cornelissen and Kafouros, 2008; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2008; Grant and Oswick, 1996; Hatch and Yanow, 2008; Marshak, 1993; Morgan, 1986; Oswick and Jones, 2006; Oswick *et al.*, 1999; Oswick and Montgomery, 1999). However, according to Cassell and Lee (2012, p.248), 'most research focuses on the deductive application of metaphors, rather than on inductive explorations of metaphorical language-in-use'. Of those that do pursue inductive explorations, Cassell and Lee (2012, p.254) distinguish between those that use 'already produced language', and those that purposefully elicit metaphors. The former type often emphasises the function of metaphor as a rhetorical device (Amernic *et al.*, 2007; Pablo and Hardy, 2009; Tourish and Hargie, 2012); and, because it relies upon texts such as transcripts it cannot probe for further detail of a person's metaphors. The latter type seeks to capture metaphors that are elicited by interventions by researchers. There are few explicit methods for eliciting naturally occurring metaphors. Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) and Jacobs and Heracleous (2006), for example, design workshop activities involving construction materials in order to elicit embodied metaphors. Cassell and Lee (2012) employed interviews, which they subsequently analysed for metaphorical content.

The first contribution of this paper is to demonstrate the potential of Clean Language as a specific method for eliciting naturally occurring metaphors in order to provide in-depth understanding of a person's symbolic world. The key difference between this method and the approach taken by Cassell and Lee

(2012) is that Clean Language enables an interviewer to elicit and probe metaphors in real time, during the interview, whilst also remaining authentic to the interviewee's own metaphors. In order to explore this potential, Clean Language was used as a method of interviewing in a collaborative academic-practitioner project to elicit the metaphors of six mid-career managers, relating to the way they experienced work-life balance. The application of Clean Language to research represents an innovation, and the study described here is believed to be the first formal empirical study of its kind.

The second contribution of this paper is to demonstrate how Clean Language can enhance the authenticity and rigour of qualitative research more widely by addressing the propensity for researchers inadvertently to introduce extraneous metaphors into an interviewee's account at both data collection and interpretation stages. The issue of quality in qualitative methods has been the subject of continuing debate in the field of organisational and management research (Amis and Silk, 2008; Bryman *et al.*, 2008; Cassell and Symon, 2011; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Gephart, 2004; Johnson *et al.*, 2006; Pratt, 2008, 2009; Sandberg, 2005; Van Maanen, 1979) and has been the subject of a government report in the UK (Spencer *et al.*, 2003). While most authors reject the idea that uniform criteria for quality can be devised, especially given the complexity and methodological pluralism that characterise qualitative research (Amis and Silk, 2008; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008), the potential for improved rigour and transparency in both the elicitation and interpretation of qualitative data is widely acknowledged. Hence Van Maanen (1979, p.523) noted not only 'widespread skepticism surrounding the ability of conventional data collection techniques to

produce data that do not distort, do violence to, or otherwise falsely portray the phenomena such methods seek to reveal', but also that 'interpretive frameworks which make such data meaningful have grown looser, more open-ended, fluid, and contingent' (1979, p.522). Gephart (2004, p.458) suggests that submissions to the *Academy of Management Journal* that are based on qualitative research need to 'show what was done in the research process and to articulate how research practices transformed observations into data, results, findings and insights'.

These concerns are relevant to interviewing, which is probably the most commonly used approach to data-gathering in qualitative research (King, 2004; Roulston, 2010), as indicated by the prevalence of studies involving qualitative interviews in BJM, such as those by Berg *et al.*, (2012), Glaister *et al.*, (2003), Li *et al.* (2012), Lindebaum and Cassell (2012), Linehan and Walsh (2000), Nentwich and Hoyer (2012), and Noon *et al.*, (2012). As Roulston (2010) points out, diverse theorisations of qualitative interviewing exist. Our concern is with interviews that may be described as phenomenological (Kvale, 1983), in that their aim to understand and represent interviewees' worlds authentically. Conklin (2007, p. 277), for example, refers to Husserl's notion of *epoche*, 'whereby a researcher attempts to put in abeyance presuppositions and prejudices she may carry with her into the field'. Although researchers who utilise this type of interview may believe that their interviews are free of such prejudices and presuppositions, this paper demonstrates how the practice of Clean Language enables further refinement.

The article is structured as follows. First, we describe Clean Language, its origins, and its relationship to the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) on metaphor and the philosophy of embodied mind. Next we demonstrate how researchers' metaphors can be brought into data collection and interpretation inadvertently, with reference to two published studies. We then describe how, in order to explore Clean Language empirically, it was used as a method of interviewing in a collaborative academic-practitioner project to elicit the metaphors of six mid-career managers, relating to the way they experienced work-life balance. After reviewing the findings from that project, we discuss the potential contribution of Clean Language to enhancing metaphor elicitation specifically, and interview-based qualitative research generally.

Background on Clean Language

Originating in the 1980s through the work of counselling psychologist David Grove with trauma victims (Grove & Panzer, 1991), Clean Language is an approach to questioning that facilitates exploration of a person's inner world through their own, naturally occurring metaphors. Grove discovered, first, that focusing on a client's metaphors provided a way into their inner symbolic world or metaphoric landscape; and second – supported by twenty-five years of experiential research through clinical practice - that facilitating a client to become immersed in that landscape, exploring it for themselves, could enable effective resolution of their issues.

In the 1990s Grove's distinctive approach was studied over some years by psychotherapists Penny Tompkins and James Lawley (Lawley and Tompkins, 2000), who began to conceptualise it by drawing on theories of metaphor and embodied cognition as developed by, for example, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999). Lakoff and Johnson, who defined the essence of metaphor as *'understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another'* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.5: italics in original), put forward the philosophical view that our conceptions of the world are fundamentally metaphorical; thus *'metaphorical thought is unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious'* (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 272). According to Lakoff and Johnson, for example, other than when used to refer to the relative location of physical things, *'up'* and *'down'* are metaphors because they have their basis in the typically vertical (i.e. standing) orientation from which humans experience the physical world. Furthermore, the typical associations of *'up'* and *'down'* with *'positive'* and *'negative'* respectively are based on this embodied experience.

The perspective that metaphors are embodied, and therefore embedded within and foundational to individuals' world views, is wholly and significantly different from viewing metaphor as something that a person chooses to use as an occasional way to embellish expression (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006). One challenge to this perspective is that although the metaphorical contents of language are evident, this does not necessarily mean that people think metaphorically. However, recent work in the field of psychological science (IJzerman and Semin, 2009; Jostmann *et al.*, 2009; Thibodeau and Boroditsky,

2011; Willems *et al.*, 2010) is considered to be addressing this criticism by providing empirical evidence.

Grove called his questioning technique Clean Language because of its intention to maintain fidelity to the client's inner world by keeping the practitioner's language as 'clean', or as free from the practitioner's own metaphors, as possible. In other words, by confining their interventions to Clean Language questions and temporarily suspending their own perspective, the practitioner conducts the conversation only in the terms of the client's emerging metaphor landscape. Given Lakoff and Johnson's views about the ubiquitous nature of metaphor, this is by no means easy. It is for this reason that Clean Language questions use a very specific and particular form of wording, as exemplified by a typical basic set of Clean Language questions shown in Table 1,

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Whilst these questions can be used within interviews, they can also be used more strategically for the purpose of 'modelling' (Lawley and Tompkins 2000)ⁱ; in other words, enabling the *interviewee* to construct a model of their metaphor landscape. In addition to psychotherapeutic applications Clean Language is used today as a method of coaching and consultancy in business (Sullivan and Rees, 2008), and has been applied to teaching and learning in Higher Education (Nixon and Walker, 2009a).

How researchers' metaphors are imported into qualitative studies

As noted above, authors such as Van Maanen (1979) point to difficulties with both data collection and interpretation in qualitative research generally. The propensity for researchers to introduce their own metaphors unwarily into their research poses a significant threat to the authenticity of the findings from such work, but is rarely unacknowledged in the research literature. For example, Gibson and Hanes (2003, p. 190) emphasise that 'questioning in the interview is of utmost importance', and research by Loftus (1975) has demonstrated how the wording of a question can influence an interviewee's recall and response. However, there is little evidence of literature on research interviewing that shows awareness of the potential influence of the researcher's own naturally occurring metaphors. Kvale's major text on interviewing offers only a rudimentary categorisation of questions (Kvale, 1996, pp. 133-135). Apart from authors such as Knight (2012) and Tosey and Mathison (2010), concern with the wording of questions and its significance appears confined to discussions of how to standardise interviews for survey purposes (e.g. Gobo, 2006; Kalton *et al.* 1978; Tanur, 1992).

To illustrate the propensity for inadvertently introducing metaphors we examine two studies, one that illustrates how a researcher's metaphors can be introduced through the questions they pose, and one that shows how a researcher's metaphors can be introduced when interpreting data.

First, we refer to a phenomenological study of the experience of ‘discovering and following one’s calling’ (Conklin, 2007, p. 275) (we note that ‘calling’ is itself a metaphor). This study is chosen because it has the rare merit of transparency about the interview questions used (Conklin 2007, p. 286), which are reproduced in Table 2. By selecting this study, therefore, we do not intend to imply that it is deficient; what it provides is a published example that enables us to examine the metaphorical content of the interviewer’s questions. By contrast for example, Berg *et al.* (2012) reveal nothing of their questions, stating only that they employed semi-structured interviews.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Conklin’s list has ten items, which comprise fourteen questions altogether. Seven of these questions introduce metaphors, represented by terms such as ‘compelled’, ‘carry around’, ‘drives’, ‘come in contact with’ and ‘played’. While these may appear relatively subtle metaphors, they are nevertheless significant because they will be processed by the interviewee for the questions to make sense, resulting in an increased likelihood of the interviewees answering within the frames presupposed by the interviewer’s metaphors rather than those which the interviewee might naturally use (Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011). Whether this occurred is impossible to determine from the article itself; the reader is offered descriptions of the rigour of the procedures undertaken, but the paper includes very little verbatim data – approximately 300 words in total, some of which is repeatedⁱⁱ.

As a more detailed example let us examine the second question in Item 5, 'What is the image you carry around that drives your actions today?' We offer three main observations about this question. First, it presupposes that the interviewee has the experience defined by the question (in this case that they *carry around an image*). Second, the suggestion that images are phenomena that the interviewee can *carry around* is clearly an embodied metaphor (Johnson, 1987), because a physical action of the body is used to describe and therefore define a mental process. In order to understand this metaphor the interviewee will need to access their experience of *carrying things around*, which will engage related associations or entailments (Lakoff, 1987, p.384). Third, the idea that the carrying around of an image *drives* actions is a strong cause-effect metaphor, based on the fundamental conceptual metaphor of causes as forces, identified by Talmy (1988). It presupposes a mental model that may not be matched by the interviewee's understanding of what motivates their actions.

The second way in which the researcher's metaphors can be introduced is through interpretation of interviewees' accounts. Here the intent of Clean Language closely resembles the practice of bracketing in phenomenology, defined as 'an attempt to hold prior knowledge or belief about the phenomena under study in suspension' (LeVasseur, 2003, p.409). It is important to acknowledge that qualitative researchers do sometimes intentionally introduce their interpretations, and make this explicit (e.g. Marshall, 1995). Our concern is with research that aims to produce faithful representations of participants' subjective worlds.

A study by Berger (2004) probes the nature of personal transformations experienced by mature students. One of them, Kathleen, is 'an articulate executive for whom stability has been the norm. A white woman in her mid-50's, she is at the height of her career in the government. Then... with a change of administration she is unexpectedly asked to step down from the influential position she has had for many years.' This study is chosen because it has the merit of including substantial interviewee data in the body of the article. The following excerpts are all from Berger (2004, p. 341).

The researcher asks Kathleen 'whether she wishes she were in a different place in her life...'. In addition to the leading nature of this question, the metaphor of a *place in her life* would be an example of 'non-clean' practice in questioning, unless Kathleen had already introduced this term herself. Kathleen replies as follows (punctuation as in original):

No, I think this *is* the journey. And I could stay in this [uncertain space], I think, forever... I don't know what to say. It just feels like it will emerge. But no, where I am right now feels very much like – it doesn't feel like a hiatus. It feels like it is the journey and that work will emerge from this place.

Kathleen's metaphors include *journey* and *emerge*. Berger then comments as follows:

In this excerpt, it is clear that Kathleen is on the edge of her knowing. She stumbles, stammers, circles back... After admitting that she doesn't know, Kathleen seems more comfortable... Perhaps she finds some footing within the slippery place of her own uncertainty.

The metaphors used here by Berger - *the edge of her knowing*, *stumbles*, *circles back*, *comfortable*, *footing*, and *slippery place* – are notable because they did not appear in Kathleen's quoted extract. Indeed, their divergence from Kathleen's words, and her world, is striking. Both her inner landscape itself and the quality of movement within it are re-interpreted to such a degree by the researcher as to risk misrepresenting this interviewee's subjective experience significantly.

Most significantly, the metaphor of an *edge* (of knowing) is mentioned no less than one hundred and four times in Berger's article; yet not once does this metaphor appear in the interviewee data cited. This supports the desirability of distinguishing clearly between metaphors introduced by a researcher as an interpretive device, and those that originate in interviewees' subjective worlds. Moreover, qualitative interview-based research is frequently less transparent than Berger's study. Consequently the question of the extent to which metaphors originate in the researcher or the participants may be undetectable by a reader.

The Work-Life Balance Project

In order to explore the potential of Clean Language as a research method that could address these problems in both questioning and interpretation, the authors and colleaguesⁱⁱⁱ designed a project in which Clean Language was used as a method of interviewing to elicit the naturally occurring metaphors of a small sample of managers relating to the way they experienced work-life balance. The principal aim of the project was to learn about the viability and usefulness of Clean Language as a research method.

Work-life balance (WLB) offers an issue of contemporary relevance to employers and employees (Beauregard, 2011; Harrington and Ladge, 2004; Linehan and Walsh, 2000) and because previous research has questioned the ideas implicit in the construct 'work-life balance' (Caproni, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2009; McMillan *et al.*, 2011; Reece *et al.*, 2009; Roberts, 2008). It implies that people divide their experience into these two categories, 'work' and 'life'; that these two categories are related by an experience analogous to 'balance'; and that the notion of balance implies that 'work' and 'life' operate in some way to stabilise, compensate for, even out or offset each other. The project therefore aimed to question the extent to which these presuppositions are reflected in participants' metaphor landscapes. Although both Cohen *et al.* (2009) and Roberts (2008) pinpoint the metaphor of 'balance' embedded in the wider WLB concept, neither has taken as systematic an approach to the exploration of people's naturally occurring metaphors as that offered by Clean Language.

Methodology

The interview sample was limited to six participants. This sample size was appropriate for the purpose of testing the method, especially given the emphasis on the detailed scrutiny of interview transcripts – comparable, we suggest, with Tourish and Hargie's (2012) study of the metaphors used by four banking CEOs.

In order to provide a reasonably homogeneous set of participants, a sample of mid-career managers (aged 40-50, of both genders) in full time employment was drawn from existing contacts of the practitioners and recruited from three different UK companies. The project was explained in writing and the voluntary, informed, written consent of all research participants was obtained. Their identities and those of their employers have been anonymised in this report. None of the managers were trained in Clean Language, nor were they given preparatory work relating to metaphor. For example, we could have provided some examples of metaphors for WLB, and asked the interviewees in advance of the interview to consider their metaphors for WLB. We chose not to do this so that the interviews would provide data on how those with no prior experience or special preparation respond to this form of interviewing. All the research participants were told that the project was about WLB and were invited to ask questions in advance of the interview, although none took up this option.

The design involved two individual interviews, both conducted by Author [C], who has trained extensively in Clean Language. The first, face-to-face interview elicited the manager's individual metaphor landscape. These interviews were carried out in

participants' workplaces and were both video and audio-recorded (the audio recording was used for the purposes of the research project; video was captured for the separate purpose of developing materials for use in Clean Language training courses). Additionally, each respondent was asked to produce a drawing of her or his metaphors after the first interview, which is a standard protocol in a Clean Language approach.

In these interviews participants were invited to explore their experiences and metaphors of 'WLB at its best' and 'WLB not at its best'. There is not space in this paper to describe in full how Clean Language questions are used in combination; in outline, the interviewer listens for naturally-occurring metaphors; uses Clean Language questions (exclusively, and principally those shown in table 1) to enable the interviewee to discover the attributes and whereabouts of symbols in their landscape; then develops an understanding of the way his or her landscape works by exploring the functional and temporal relationships between its symbolic elements. A criterion of effectiveness used in Clean Language practice is that the interviewee's attention becomes immersed in their metaphor landscape, with a strongly self-reflexive focus. In order to illustrate how the interviews proceeded, Appendix A shows an excerpt from one of the transcripts.

Approximately two weeks after that first set of interviews, follow-up interviews were carried out by phone or skype. The follow-up interview aimed to capture each manager's reflections on the initial interview, together with their perceptions of the effects or otherwise of the process; and to gather more details about participants' main metaphors.

All interviews were transcribed and marked-up by the interviewer such that the source of each metaphor (ie whether it was from a participant or the interviewer) could be easily identified. The interviewer then carried out an initial analysis of data gathered from each face-to-face interview, highlighting key metaphors and themes and, in particular, the distinctions between WLB at its best and not at its best. In a further step, author [B] (a recognised expert in the field of Clean Language) checked and validated both the accuracy of the transcript analyses, ensuring that they were faithful to participants' descriptions, and the overall integrity of the interview process. The results of the validation are discussed after the substantive data about participants' metaphor landscapes.

Next we describe the substantive data about the manager's metaphors of WLB, and then proceed to review Clean Language as a method.

Participants' Metaphor Landscapes

The analysis yielded a unique metaphor landscape for each manager. Table 3 summaries the six participant's metaphor landscapes. When presenting data, even where summarised, the interviewees' own words appear in quotation marks.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

For participant B, for example, WLB at its best is like 'doing a particularly good job at juggling', like 'riding on the crest of a wave [...] you're on top of everything [...] you're on a high, I suppose [...] a natural high.' This is short

lived and for the most part the relationship between work and life is like 'going up a mountain' while 'having to dodge boulders'. When WLB is not at its best, 'stress levels go up the balls feel heavier' they become like 'boulders rather than like tennis balls' and 'you have to throw them faster'. The bigger the boulders are 'the more stressed you are trying to dodge them' and 'ultimately you might not be able to' and you're 'going to get crushed at the bottom'.

Contrasts between work-life balance when it was working and when it was not working are also illustrated graphically by the pictures they draw. For example, Figures 1a and 1b are participants B's drawings of 'riding the crest of a wave' and 'going up a hill dodging boulders'. Figures 2a and 2b are participant F's drawings of WLB as 'juggling' and 'spinning tops', at best compared with at worst.

INSERT FIGURES 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b ABOUT HERE

Although there was no explicit intention to identify how the interviewees *assessed* their WLB at the time of the interview, the majority of interviewees did comment on their current situation with most reporting that they were currently far from at their best ('a million miles away', said one in their follow-up interview).

Patterns of Response

A key finding from these interviews is that, despite the apparent popularity of the 'work-life balance' metaphor in common parlance, our interviewees' main

metaphors did not overtly involve 'a balance'. However a number of their metaphors did involve some form of *balancing*, for example when 'juggling' (Interviewees B and F), 'surfing' (Interviewee B), or in 'equality' (Interviewee E). The more the interviews progressed, the less the notion of balance was actively involved in participants' descriptions unless re-introduced by the interviewer.

Metaphors of 'separation' and 'switching' were recurring themes. For example, all six managers made use of the metaphor 'switch' (eg 'switch off', 'switch out of', 'switch back on', 'Friday evening switch') and five used 'separate', 'compartmentalise' or 'split'. For some, a separation was part of WLB at its best, whereas for one, it was the absence of a split that indicated WLB at its best. These findings indicate the importance of understanding the *relationship between* work and life in individuals' own terms.

Our findings indicate several themes for future research into personal metaphors of WLB. First, the metaphor of 'switch' suggests that it may be especially interesting to attend to *how* individuals switch or separate. Second, most interviewees indicated that their behaviour changed when they were approaching or had crossed a threshold from WLB being good enough to unacceptable, or vice versa. Third is the question of how managers *scaled* their sense of WLB; in other words, by what means were they able to decide that it was getting better or worse, both day-by-day and over longer time periods. Finally, there is evidence of a range of relationships between life domains that cannot be reduced to the single metaphor of balance.

Modelling a Metaphor Landscape

A principal claim for Clean Language is that an interviewee can be encouraged to describe their experience in a way that gives some insight into how his or her metaphor landscape works as a whole coherent system. The notion of a system refers to the fact that eliciting a model successfully requires information about both the elements of someone's experience and, crucially, the relationship between those components, in particular the sequential, causal and contingent relationships. The resulting model is then available for understanding an individual's behavior and decisions, being amended or applied in other contexts.

An example of how such a model of a metaphoric system can be derived from the interview data (for Interviewee B) is shown in Figure 3.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

In summary, the interviews elicited unique, dynamic and highly personal metaphors for each manager. Although they conveyed their sense of relationship between different domains of life in varying ways, these domains were not necessarily categorised as 'work' and 'life', nor was the relationship between them necessarily a question of seeking to achieve 'balance'. The explicit metaphor of balance appeared only rarely, even though many of the participants' metaphors implied a dynamic notion of *balancing*. From a Clean Language perspective one would be cautious about aggregating different individual

metaphors. Nevertheless the study has identified some interesting commonalities in interviewees' metaphors, such as the prevalence of a notion of 'switch'.

Reviewing the Clean Language Interviews

Now we review the experience of using Clean Language as a method of interviewing in this project.

For the purposes of this study it was important to establish that the interviews were authentic examples of the Clean Language questioning technique. In the judgment of the expert analyst, the face-to-face interviews constituted an authentic application both at a micro level (through appropriate use of Clean Language questions) and as a process of modeling, as described above. Analysis of the six initial interviews revealed that 242 questions were asked in total, ranging from 31 to 53 questions per interview, with an average of 40. Of these, 99% met the criteria of being 'clean'. The eleven basic Clean Language questions given in Table 1 accounted for 85% of all questions (discussion before and after the interview proper was ignored since it was mainly about research procedure and not WLB). Indeed the interviewer was considered by Author [B] to have set a benchmark that any future research using this method could seek to emulate.

Given the overt metaphor contained in the research question and its potential for biasing interviewees' responses, we recognised before the study began that care and skill would be needed on the part of the interviewer. These challenges became apparent during the face-to-face interviews when, in response to the

opening question, ‘When your work-life balance is at its best, that’s like what?’^{iv}, some of the interviewees commented directly, or by implication, that they were construing the world differently:

It's [an] interesting concept isn't it and I think for me it's a statement that came out - I first became aware of [it] a few years ago, I never used to see my life as a kind of a balance between work or life personally... I just didn't see it as an either-or. (Interviewee E)

Interviewee A’s response was to translate the opening research question into their own words:

So in work-life balance I - presume you're - when I'm happiest at work and happiest at home, is that what you're saying?

When exploring participants’ perceptions, sometimes the interviewer required patience and persistence in order for an overt metaphor to emerge. For example, it was not until two-thirds of the way through the interview that Interviewee A produced their ‘completed or joined circle’ metaphor. On the other hand, F came up with ‘juggling’ at the very beginning of the interview. This variation is common and requires the interviewer to ask questions in a way that paces the interviewees’ awareness of the metaphoric aspects of their experience.

Interviewees who tend to give specific examples or abstract descriptions may take a while before they connect with a metaphor, but once they do it can become an important source of self-knowledge.

Departures, however slight, from a consistently 'clean' approach can affect the response. For example, the transcripts do show some variation in the way that both the face-to-face and follow-up interviews were opened up for discussion. This resulted in the occasional unintended introduction of metaphors. For example, by saying 'we will spend a little bit of time focusing on work/life balance' the interviewer unnecessarily introduced the metaphors of 'spend' and 'focusing'.

It is important to note that Clean Language does not claim that it is possible or even desirable to avoid the interviewer's influence altogether. The researcher intentionally invites an interviewee to attend to various aspects of their metaphor landscape through the selection of questions and through the selection of content. The stance taken by the interviewer is that the *interviewee* is an expert on their inner experience. The interviewer therefore facilitates the interviewee to access and describe the relevant experience. While there is a case for suggesting that during the interview the interviewee is in part creating as well as describing their experience, that is not considered problematic since it is assumed that the way they create new understanding will be consistent with their existing mental models, providing that the interviewer's metaphors and assumptions are not superimposed.

The follow-up interviews fulfilled their purpose of gathering two kinds of information: reflection on the interview process, and further investigation of an individual's metaphors. All of the interviewees had remembered their main metaphors and readily accepted them as the frame for the second interview. Also,

the majority of participants stated that they had enjoyed the interviews and gained valuable insights into their personal metaphors relating to WLB:

You had to think about it quite deeply [...] [It was] quite thought-provoking. [...] it definitely felt different from how you can normally be interviewed. (Interviewee C)

Interviewees reported either that they had had no difficulty with the Clean Language approach, or that where they did have difficulty they found it easier to answer the questions as the interview progressed.

Personal change, which is normally a goal of Clean Language work in a coaching or therapeutic context, was not pursued intentionally within this research study. However, two participants reported that they had already made changes in their life to redress their current WLB as a result of the initial interview.

[...] the few weekends [...] since then have been really good [...] I have the conversation with my wife [...] about the fact that you know, Friday night is my switch and it's quite useful [...] by getting the difference between the weekends and the weeks, not just means that I enjoy my weekends more, it also means that I'm in a better state to - keep going all through the week. (Interviewee D)

Another two participants had taken a decision to make changes, although the follow-up interview was too soon after the initial interview for them to have implemented those decisions.

In summary, Clean Language provides explicit and systematic principles for metaphor elicitation. The WLB project has described how Clean Language yields detailed descriptions of each participant's experience (Table 3). Researchers were able to distinguish between metaphors introduced by an interviewer, whether through their questions or through interpretation of data, and those that originated in and more faithfully represent interviewees' subjective worlds. The principles and techniques of Clean Language can be shared and discussed by researchers, thereby increasing the transparency and rigour of the process, as illustrated by the role of expert review in validating the analysis. Interviewees were comfortable with the approach either initially or as the interview progressed, comfortable. There was clear evidence that participants recalled the metaphors they had explored in the initial interviews, and that some participants made spontaneous changes as a result of the interviews.

Discussion

We suggest that Clean Language could be used in research in at least four distinct ways, shown in order of increasing complexity in Table 4.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

At the most basic level a researcher could employ Clean Language questions within a qualitative interview approach to elicit interesting data, without any intent on the part of the researcher to concentrate on eliciting metaphors in detail. Even at this basic level it can make an important contribution to quality. At the other extreme, an entire research strategy could be devised using 'clean' principles and envisaged as a process of modelling, starting with the formulation of the research question itself. These distinctions underline the importance of knowing which level of application is intended within any project. A judgment needs to be made in relation to the objectives and intended claims of individual studies about whether and to what extent Clean Language may be relevant.

As a process for the elicitation of metaphor, Clean Language appears to build on previous accounts of metaphor elicitation such as that provided by Cassell and Lee (2012). The key difference between this method and existing approaches is that Clean Language enables an interviewer to elicit and probe metaphors in real time, during the interview, whilst also remaining authentic to the interviewee's own metaphors.

Cassell and Lee (2012, p.266) comment on 'the lack of new metaphors' in their data set, referring to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) distinction between conventional and new metaphors. Whether this is a function of the people interviewed or of the interview method could be addressed in future research using an interview approach that is based on Clean Language. We would expect, as suggested by our data, that such interviews would elicit metaphors that are new in the sense that they not in common use but are particular to each

individual participant. Moreover, Clean Language demonstrably enables a researcher to develop a detailed understanding of a participant's metaphorical landscape, rather than relying on the researcher's inferences (logical or otherwise) about entailments at the stage of analysis.

There remains an issue of how to make the rigour of such a process apparent enough in the space available in journal articles; thus Gephart (2004) describes the typical problem when writing accounts of qualitative research of the trade-off between detail and interpretation. This affects the degree of detail we have been able to present in this paper - it would, for example, be possible to produce annotated transcripts to show the entire metaphor elicitation process.

Nevertheless, the arguments and empirical evidence above surely support the need for accounts of qualitative research to be more detailed and explicit in order to address the concerns about data collection and interpretation voiced by Van Maanen (1979). We are confident, for example, that procedures involving Clean Language can not only be made transparent, but also explained with reference to explicit principles.

As noted, Clean Language is most likely to be useful in phenomenological interviews designed to explore and elicit an interviewee's subjective world, and we have illustrated how an interviewee's account can be developed into a complex, systemic understanding of their inner world or 'metaphor landscape', in the form of the model of a person's metaphors operating over time (Figure 3). This parallels to some extent the phenomenological process of producing textural and structural descriptions (Conklin, 2007, p. 278), in the sense that both are

concerned with the organisation of subjective worlds. There are, of course, alternative and competing conceptions of the interview (Roulston, 2010) for which Clean Language is less likely to be relevant. In particular numerous authors (such as Alvesson, 2003; Kvale, 2006; Rapley, 2001; Silverman, 2000; Wang and Roulston, 2007) criticise the potential for data-gathering interviews to elicit self-justifying claims by interviewees. From our collective experience we would speculate that a metaphor chosen tactically for the purpose of self-justification is unlikely to yield a detailed metaphor landscape through the sustained exploration that Clean Language entails. However, we acknowledge that we have not tested this point.

Finally, an issue that has arisen in discussion with colleagues is that of the extent to which specialist training is required in order to make use of Clean Language. Eliciting a person's way of assessing a concept such as WLB requires a high degree of interviewing skill, and the quality of information obtained in this study is directly related to the competence of the interviewer. Nevertheless, we have encountered some reluctance to contemplate a method that may require training, which we find puzzling. We note that Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008: 426) comment on the potential for 'a lack of appreciation of the value of qualitative research and skill in conducting such research', and suggest that methods like Clean Language may make it easier to appreciate such skill. The training needed to make competent and ethical use of Clean Language seems to us to be no more, or less, stringent than that needed for the use of statistical techniques use in quantitative methods. Furthermore, the need for training is likely to vary according to the level of application, as shown in Table 4, which means that researchers do have choice and

that those wishing to incorporate Clean Language questions alone (Level 1) can do so readily.

Conclusions

This paper has shown how Clean Language provides a systematic approach to the inductive exploration of naturally occurring metaphors, and thereby enables in-depth understanding of a person's inner symbolic world. It has also shown how Clean Language can offset the propensity for qualitative researchers using interviews to introduce their own metaphors inadvertently into an interviewee's account at both data collection and interpretation stages, thereby enhancing the authenticity and rigour of phenomenological interviews.

Given the concerns about quality cited at the beginning of the paper, the refinements introduced by Clean Language appear to offer worthwhile and significant contributions to quality in qualitative research. Researchers can incorporate Clean Language in a variety of ways, on a spectrum from incorporating Clean Language questions in interviews to overarching research design principles.

ATTRIBUTES

- And what kind of X is that X?
- And is there anything else about X?

LOCATION

- And where/whereabouts is X?

REFLEXIVITY

- And how do you know X?

METAPHOR

- And that's X like what?

RELATIONSHIP

- And when X, what happens to Y?
- And is there a relationship between X and Y?
- And is X the same or different as Y?

AFTER

- And then what happens/what happens next?

SOURCE

- And where does/could X come from?

BEFORE

- And what happens just before X?

Where 'X' and 'Y' = the interviewee's *exact* words.

Table 1: Basic Clean Language Questions (adapted from <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/>, accessed 24th August 2012)

1. What compelled you to get involved in this work? Why do you do this?
2. What is the best thing about being involved in this work?
3. What are your hopes for this place, the world, the future?
4. What gives you hope?
5. What do you imagine the future to be? What is the image you carry around that drives your actions today?
6. What are your highest hopes for the work that you are doing?
7. Who else is involved?
8. What is the nature of the relationships that you have with the others who are involved? Who are they and how did you happen to come into contact with them?
9. How are you different from being involved in this work and with these other people?
10. Links to ecology, fundraising, relationships, politics. What roles have these topics played in your work? How do you manage these organizational realities and keep a keen eye on your mission or vision?

Table 2: Interview questions as used by Conklin (2007) with selected metaphors underlined

Participant	Core theme	Detail
A	<i>'Two halves of a circle'</i>	The 'ideal' work/life balance is like 'two halves of a circle'. A 'full circle – almost joined but it's not'. It's like there is an 'invisible bond' between. You can be 'immersed in one or the other' because 'one doesn't affect the other', you can 'separate the two'. This creates a 'circle of happiness' in 'complete harmony', 'a happy cycle'. 'The join is very fragile'. It's 'held together by that moment, that day'. It's 'not like you can superglue them together'. 'The closeness of the [halves] seems to shift quite a lot'. If one affects the other 'it breaks the join', 'cracks in the seam' appear and you 'start to worry'. 'If you can't switch [work] off' a negative 'cycle starts'. This 'forces it apart even more' like a 'wave is pushing the seams apart'. Then it becomes 'not so much of a circle', 'more like two links in a chain'. There is 'a point where it can't part any further' then 'I know I have to bring that circle together'.
B	<i>'Riding on the crest of a wave' and 'Going up a mountain dodging boulders'</i>	Being 'in harmony' with your work and 'your outside life' is like 'doing a particularly good job at juggling balls' and you 'feel in control'. This is 'not a prolonged high'. As 'stress levels go up the balls feel heavier' they become like 'boulders rather than like tennis balls' and 'you have to throw them faster'. That becomes 'like going up a mountain' and 'having to dodge boulders coming down'. The bigger the boulders are 'the more stressed you are trying to dodge them' and 'ultimately you might not be able to' and you're 'going to get crushed at the bottom'. Then you have to 'take yourself away' from the mountain to 'a fresh environment' where 'you can relax and just switch off'. 'The ultimate' balance is like 'riding on the crest of a wave [...] on top of everything'. Yet, that is <i>not</i> when you've 'got to the top' of the mountain, it is when you 'keep going up [...] managing to dodge the boulders, and you're making good progress'.

C	<i>‘Physical and mental separation’</i>	<p>When WLB is at it’s best there is a ‘physical and mental separation between’ home and work, with ‘definite lines between the two’. ‘It’s difficult mentally if you don’t switch off’ and ‘detach the two’. ‘Stepping back a bit and looking at the bigger picture’ rather than ‘just fighting off the task of the day to day’ gives ‘a sense of feeling in control of both’ work and home. ‘You feel better about yourself’. WLB is at its worst when ‘the two interfere with each other’. At work you are ‘running from pillar to post’, ‘constantly rushing’, ‘losing a lot of time’, and the worries can ‘run away with you’. At home there’s a ‘nagging at the back of your mind’ that you are ‘missing things’. This means ‘feeling of out of control’ and ‘you’re leaving things with a list of things to be done whether that’s at work or at home’. It’s a ‘vicious circle’.</p>
D	<i>‘A split’ with ‘a Friday evening switch’</i>	<p>Weekends are for family, weeks are for work [...] that’s the sort of split I do’. When WLB is at its best ‘I just seem to compartmentalise them’. They are like ‘the Yin and Yang’ – ‘one of them allows me to do the other one’. The weekend ‘satisfies a whole basket of needs’, the week ‘the whole basket of other needs’. There is a ‘Friday evening switch’, which ‘comes back on [...] with the alarm clock on Monday morning’. ‘The pace at which I do everything in the week is boom-boom-boom-boom-boom’. ‘I can’t keep that pace going forever’. It’s like ‘batteries on your camera’. ‘I get energy from the week [but] it’s not enough to completely fill it up’. ‘The weekend allows me to build up the charge’. But, when ‘the distinction between the week and weekend [...] blurs into one’ they ‘interfere’ with each other. If there’s ‘no break in the intensity’ and ‘if I haven’t recharged enough [...] I’m just so knackered [...] it just hits you [...] you can get really run down [...] the older I get I think it catches up with me quicker’. It ‘gets into a vicious cycle’.</p>

E	<i>'A deal'</i>	<p>'It's the work/commute/life balance that's the issue' - 'commuting' is 'part of the equation'. It has to be 'a deal': 'if I do do the extra, there is pay-back from time to time when I want it.' The deal involves 'being fairly treated' and 'a bit of flex and a bit of give and take [...] on both sides' then 'I'll go that extra mile'. It is not a 'master-servant type relationship [where] people feel exploited' and 'feel like canned fodder'. Work/life balance is best when you 'compartmentalise' and find a 'sensible way of switching off from work.' 'You can spend more time for yourself so therefore you feel healthier.' This means 'you can push yourself to do a few more things'. 'It's a virtuous circle.' If WLB isn't right 'task-type things' can 'play on your mind', 'pleasure pursuits' are 'encroached on', you get 'slightly under par', 'physically and mentally tired' and that can become a 'negative circle'.</p>
F	<i>'Juggling' and 'like a spinning top'</i>	<p>WLB at its best is like 'juggling'. There's 'a real ease' and 'a sense of balance', 'feeling energised'. The balls are 'falling back into your hands without you having to strain and struggle'. Whereas, when it's not at its best the balls are 'out of your reach', 'if you drop the ball [...] it's gone' and it 'feels chaotic'. When it's working well 'you feel centred [...] like a spinning top that is balanced [...] the colours start blending'. It can 'take you into a whole world of discovery and creativity and imagination'. There's 'one centre point, and the work and the life is sort of all spinning around'. They're <i>not</i> 'compartmentalised', there's <i>no</i> 'switch out of work mode'. 'If I'm really am being true to who I am, there isn't a difference then between how I'm acting at home or at work'. If the top is not on its centre 'it starts to sort of wobble [...] it falls over and clatters' and if there are several tops 'it's no longer playful because you're having to run from one to the other to keep them spinning'.</p>

Table 3: Interviewees' metaphors of work-life balance

	Level	Description
1.	A questioning technique	Making use of Clean Language questions as technical elements within any interview method and context, in order to minimise the introduction of the researcher's metaphors and constructs.
2.	A method of eliciting interviewee-generated metaphors	Using Clean Language questions tactically within an interview, in order to elicit metaphors and metaphoric material.
3.	A means of 'in the moment' modelling by the interviewer (during the interview) of an individual's metaphor landscape	Using Clean Language to elicit and model the interviewee's metaphor landscape, highlighting connections and relationships between metaphors as well as the metaphors themselves.
4.	A coherent research strategy based on 'clean' principles and 'modelling' from start to finish.	Using Clean Language both as a method and in principle to guide the entire research process including formulating the research question and reviewing features and patterns of the total data.

Table 4: Progressive levels of Clean Language in interview-based research

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ⁱ Lawley and Tompkins (2000) refer to that process as 'Symbolic Modelling', which they describe as 'a method of facilitating individuals to become more familiar with the organization of their metaphors so that they can discover new ways of perceiving themselves and their world' (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000. p.xiv).

ⁱⁱ The online version includes some 3,600 words.

ⁱⁱⁱ The full research team consisted of two academic researchers, from different institutions, and four practitioners from, or affiliated to, a commercial 'Clean Language' training organisation. The project was funded by a small pump-priming grant from the lead author's institution, with matched contributions in kind from the training organisation.

^{iv} The question 'When X is at its best, that's like what?' (and variations on this question) is commonly used by Clean Language modellers to elicit the metaphor for a person's ideal state or situation. It was developed by Caitlin Walker.