

Becoming a ‘Lifer’? Unlocking Career Through Metaphor

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Becoming a ‘Lifer’?

Unlocking Career Through Metaphor

Dr Amal El-Sawad
Business School
Loughborough University
Loughborough
Leicestershire
LE11 3TU

Email: A.El-Sawad@lboro.ac.uk

Tel: 01509 223649

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in the adoption of metaphor analysis as a method of studying organisational and working life, there have been few if any empirical studies of career metaphors. Whilst career scholars have imposed their own metaphors to help illuminate their conceptions of career, the metaphors employed by those having careers and the conceptual insight this might generate has been all but ignored. This paper seeks to address this gap. Drawing on the career accounts of graduate-level employees within a large blue-chip corporation, the metaphors they employ are analysed. The dominant metaphors contained within the careers literature – spatial, journey, horticultural and competition metaphors – are drawn on heavily by participants but so too are other groups of metaphors not acknowledged within the literature. These are revealed as imprisonment, military, school-like surveillance, ‘Wild West’ and nautical metaphors. An analysis of these metaphors generates fresh insights into the concept of career and leads to the ‘unlocking’ of important but to date neglected features of career. On the basis of this metaphor analysis, the paper argues that career may be better understood in terms of a politicised process in which discipline and control are key dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

There has been growing interest in the adoption of metaphor analysis as a method of studying organisational life (e.g. Morgan, 1986; Grant and Osrick, 1996; Osrick and Grant, 1996). Metaphor analysis has also been argued to offer a powerful tool in the study of careers (e.g. Gunz, 1989; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Mignot, 2000; Inkson, 2001, 2002). Yet despite its promise, to date there have been few if any empirical studies of the career metaphors adopted by individuals having careers. Instead, careers researchers have selected their own metaphors and used these to help illuminate particular features of career. Whilst such analyses are useful in communicating researchers' conceptions of career and its context, the opportunity to access the conceptions of those they are studying is missed. This is a great shame, since eliciting the metaphors employed by those having careers rather than relying on the metaphors imposed by those studying careers would make an informative contribution to the ongoing debate about how the concept of career should be understood and what its key features are. The primary aim of this paper is to plug this gap. Drawing on empirical evidence, the dominant metaphors contained in the careers literature are compared and contrasted with the freely elicited 'metaphors-in-use' (Grant and Osrick, 1996) of graduate level employees within a large blue-chip corporation. This leads subsequently to the 'unlocking' of political and controlling dimensions of career which, it is argued, have been woefully neglected in literature to date.

The paper starts by outlining the features and functions of metaphor. Next, the dominant metaphors adopted by career scholars within the literature are assessed and four broad groups of metaphor identified: spatial, journey, horticultural and

competition metaphors. Following a brief outline of the method and analytical strategy adopted in this study, the metaphors employed by individuals having careers are analysed. This ‘unlocks’ several new dimensions to career, identifying a variety of new metaphors not reflected in the careers literature – imprisonment, military, school-like surveillance, Wild West and nautical metaphors. Finally, the contributions these ‘metaphors-in-use’ make to the conceptual debate about career is discussed.

METAPHOR AND CAREER

Metaphor can be understood as a figure of speech used to imply resemblance between an action or object, event or experience on the one hand and a (usually commonly used) word or phrase on the other. Its function is to “communicate the unknown by transposing it in terms of the known” (Gowler and Legge, 1989: 439). Individuals draw on metaphor to convey feelings and thoughts and express experiences and emotions which might otherwise remain unspoken. Cazal and Inns (1998: 179) point to the utility of metaphor in offering “insights to hidden, barely conscious feelings” as do Miles and Huberman (1994) who believe that metaphors encourage researchers to look beyond the existing career concepts and models thereby helping to generate new insights or, as Inkson (2001) puts it, ‘unveil’ features currently obscured from view. This ‘generative capacity’ (Alvesson, 1994) of metaphor or, in other words, its potential to offer new conceptual insights is also highlighted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Tietze, Musson and Cohen (2003). Since new metaphors allow us to view old and familiar concepts in new and unfamiliar ways (Morgan, 1986; Gowler and Legge, 1989), this approach might therefore generate fresh insights in the careers

field. Certainly evidence from elsewhere - for example Morgan's (1986) now seminal work 'Images of Organisation' and Dunford and Palmer's (1996) study of corporate restructuring - would seem to demonstrate this.

The generative capacity of metaphor is particularly useful in studies of career since there is currently much heated debate about how the career concept should be understood. The concept of career remains, it seems, "slippery" (Van Maanen, 1977: 1). Mainstream portrayals of the concept have been criticised on a number of grounds, including for offering uncritical (Van Maanen, 1977; Grey, 1994) and apolitical portrayals of career. Issues of power have been almost entirely neglected (Collin and Young, 2000). In addition, the extent of movement away from 'old' bureaucratic and traditional career forms towards 'new careers' is hotly disputed. There is a good deal of empirical evidence which suggests that the traditional bureaucratic form of career is alive and well and far from extinct, for example Sturges et al (2000), Guest and MacKenzie Davey (1996), Halford et al (1997), Halford and Savage (1995), Jackson et al (1996), Nicholson (1996) and Goffee and Jones (2000). Despite this and despite there being scant empirical support (Cohen and Mallon, 1999), in recent academic commentaries "the demise of the traditional career is widely heralded" (Mallon, 1999: 358). For example, Bridges (1995), Mirvis and Hall (1996), Collin and Watts (1996), Herriot and Pemberton (1995) and even Kanter (1989) predict at the very least the impending extinction of the traditional career. Hall (1996: 1) declares, "the career as we once knew it – as a series of upward moves, with steadily increasing income, power, status, and security – has died." The replacement for the 'old' career - the 'new career' - comes under a number of different guises. For example, the 'entrepreneurial career' (Kanter, 1989); the 'post-bureaucratic' career (Adamson et al,

1998); the ‘protean’ career (e.g. Hall, 1996; Hall and Moss, 1998) and the ‘boundaryless’ career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Though labels differ, new careers allegedly share the key features of offering autonomy and self-direction to those who pursue them. New careerists are seen as masters of their own destinies. Metaphor analysis is used here to ‘unveil’ and bring new evidence to bear on this debate challenging some of these claims.

In the process of analysing metaphors there are a number of issues to bear in mind. First, established and widely-used metaphors are, according to Tietze et al (2003), frequently taken-for-granted and therefore may escape critical scrutiny. Taking a fresh look at well-established metaphors can however generate new perspectives (Alvesson, 1994). It is therefore important that these ‘metaphors we live by’, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) refer to them, are unpacked. Second, it should be noted that metaphor often highlights certain features whilst simultaneously obscuring others (Tietze et al, 2003). Gowler and Legge (1989) note the positive and negative interpretations which a single metaphor may encapsulate and urge researchers to look for both. Morgan (1986) and Collin (1997) warn of the partial insights generated by a single metaphor and recommend that a number of metaphors are explored in order to offer a more rounded view. This advice is heeded here as established metaphors within the literature as well as metaphors-in-use of participants in the study are assessed. Beginning with the former, the following section assesses what the metaphors scholars live by tell us of their core assumptions about career. The dominant metaphors employed by academics within the careers literature appear to fall into four broad groups: spatial, journey, horticultural, and competition metaphors. The following discussion explores these.

Spatial metaphors

Spatial career metaphors draw particular attention to implicit notions of vertical mobility encapsulated in traditional and bureaucratic career conceptions. Gunz (1989) notes their widespread adoption in the career literature, with frequent reference to hierarchies, pyramids, vertical and lateral moves, moves to the centre, climbing career ladders, high-flyers and so on. As Barley (1989: 48) explains:

The notion of vertical mobility is so well entrenched in career research that many of the terms we frequently use to discuss careers make no sense unless hierarchical structures are presumed. Consider, for instance, whether one can comprehend 'up and out', 'career ladder', 'platteauing', 'promotion', 'demotion' or even 'lateral transfer' without at least tacitly referring to the notion of verticality.

These spatial metaphors run counter to what many believe are fundamental changes in career contexts. As such they are seen by many as, to all intents and purposes, defunct. For example, Parker and Inkson (1999) insist career ladders are disappearing as do Herriot (1992), Mirvis and Hall (1996) and Savickas (2000).

Journey metaphors

Nicholson and West (1989) identify the metaphor of journey as a powerful shaper of thinking on careers, which frames careers as travel along 'paths' (Herriot, 1992).

Nicholson and West (1989) believe that such notions have broad appeal since they conjure up comforting images of careers with direction, purpose and clear starting and

finishing points. Journey metaphors can take on a number of different ‘spins’. A positive interpretation might frame the careerist as in control of the journey, planning the route, deciding where to go, when to go, how fast and when to slow down.

The detection of journey metaphors in the careers literature is unsurprising given the origins of the word career which is derived from the Latin word *carraria* meaning a road or carriageway (Arthur and Lawrence, 1984:1). Indeed, Sennett (1998: 9) traces the earliest English usage of the word ‘career’ as meaning “a road for carriages.” Perhaps reflecting the state of 14th century English roads, Raymond Williams (1970 in Savage 1998: 66) observed that until the 1850s ‘career’ signified “unstable movement.” Only after this point in time did career come to mean “regularized and steady movement through a series of occupational stages” (Savage, 1998: 66). However, as Arthur, Inkson and Pringle (1999: 165) point out, the verb ‘to career’, meaning “to swerve about wildly in an uncontrolled manner”, is well established and still widely used. Here we see a more insecure and arguably negative reading of the journey metaphor. It is this interpretation, this out of control and dangerous view of career, which is apparently downplayed in the careers literature, ‘unveiling’ perhaps another neglected dimension of careers in studies to date. Unpacking horticultural metaphors offers a similar revelation.

Horticultural metaphors

Gunz (1989) notes the widespread use of horticultural metaphors in the careers literature. Like other metaphors this one too can be read in a number of ways. It conjures images of, in career terms, growing (usually upwards towards the warm life-

giving sunshine), flowering and blossoming. There is however also a less enticing interpretation.

The horticultural metaphor dramatizes careers as autonomously growing things which need taming. For instance, talent is home-grown or implanted, deadwood is pruned, bad apples are discarded... All of these have in common the idea that people in the organisation are somehow under the control of the gardener and that they can be changed in the way that the gardener wants to change them. The increasingly common use of the term 'human resources' for people is very revealing in this context. It implicitly labels people as things to be used or acted on, instead of treating them as collaborators in the process.
(Gunz, 1989: 86)

This loss of individual control is also reflected in the “wilderness metaphor” noted by Hall and Moss (1998: 26) which refers to notions of “getting lost in the woods and finding one’s way out.” Controlling and disciplining aspects of career are revealed within these metaphors yet the literature to date is restricted almost exclusively to apolitical presentations of career with issues of control and discipline downplayed.

Competition metaphors

In Ancient Greece, the term career meant a “fast paced running of a course – some sort of race” (Van Maanen, 1977: 1) and the origins of notions of career as competition are likely to derive from this. Rosenbaum (1989) notes that career talk often embraces competitive social Darwinism and that employees often draw parallels between career issues and athletic competitions. Indeed, Rosenbaum (1979, 1989) has

found empirical evidence of career operating as a series of ‘tournaments’ – “systems for selecting the most talented individuals by a series of progressively more selective competitions” (Rosenbaum, 1989: 336). Gowler and Legge (1989: 439) note in particular the metaphor of careers as “uphill struggles” and “rat races.”

Someone with a ‘successful career’ is a ‘high flyer’ who has survived the ‘rat race’ and beaten competitors on the ‘fast track’. Here the images are positive: of ‘ascent’, ‘speed’, and ‘winning’. In contrast, the individual who has ‘no career’ or is a ‘career failure’ is often described negatively in terms of a ‘dead-end job’, ‘dead wood’, ‘passed over’, ‘washed up’ or ‘burnt out’. Notably the images are frequently of death, decay and destruction.

(Gowler and Legge, 1989: 446).

Gowler and Legge (1989) succeed here in teasing out a number of different readings of the competition metaphor – both positive and negative ‘spins’. Implicit in these portrayals are the existence of winners but also losers, of the haves but also the have-nots. These latter interpretations again ‘unveil’ career as a potentially politicised process which the former may serve to mask.

The review of dominant career metaphors within the literature begins to reveal an apparent gap between some of the dimensions they highlight - notably in terms of discipline, control and politics - and the autonomous and self-directing dimensions claimed to be central to the ‘new’ career forms. Uncovering the career ‘metaphors-in-use’ of members of one particular organisation as the proceeding sections of this

paper does supports further this initial observation and helps shed some light on the anomalies detected in the existing careers literature.

METHOD

Derived from a broader qualitative study of career in context, the evidence presented in this paper is based on the (largely unstructured) interview accounts of 20 (8 men and 12 women) graduate-level employees drawn from a range of job functions, levels and locations within a blue-chip corporation. (Figure 1 offers a more detailed profile). In terms of work roles, participants fall into four broad groups: managers, technical specialists, functional specialists and generalists. All participants have (at least) a degree level qualification and their average age is 30 years (the youngest is 28 and the oldest 34 years). Interviews were launched with a single request of the participant – ‘tell me about you career...’ Metaphors were offered freely within accounts without any prompt. Numbers of participants were restricted to 20 to facilitate the in-depth consideration of accounts. Such limited numbers are not unusual in the field.

Nicholson and West (1989: 189) point out participants in others’ studies have numbered from just 3 (White, 1952) to 40 (Levinson et al, 1978). Schein (1977) used data from just 44 interviewees to develop his ‘career anchors’. Kolb and Plovnick (1977) tested their ‘experiential learning theory of career development’ first on 47 medical undergraduates and latterly on 20 managers.

*** Insert Figure 1 here**

Methodologically the approach adopted here might be described as a critical-interpretive one (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) and critically reflecting on career as seen “through the eyes of the beholder” (Van Maanen, 1977: 174) is deemed crucial here.

In terms of the analytical strategy adopted, each interview account was fully transcribed and a process of open coding conducted with each transcript being studied in turn - word by word, line by line - for metaphors. After several iterations of this process metaphors generated by participants which shared similar properties and themes were grouped together. Only after this process was conducted were these metaphors-in-use compared with those present in the careers literature. Excerpts from transcripts presented in this paper have been selected for illustrative purposes and also to allow the reader to assess for themselves the breadth and depth of a particular metaphor.

CAREER ‘METAPHORS-IN-USE’

Attention is turned here to an analysis of participants’ ‘metaphors-in-use’. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” and evidence presented here suggests this is certainly the case in this instance. Gunz’s (1989) observation that, in their career accounts, individuals draw heavily on metaphor for descriptive purposes proves an accurate one here too. The dominant career metaphors - spatial, journey, competition and horticultural - are certainly well represented in

participants' accounts. In addition, other groups of new career metaphors not acknowledged within the literature are exposed and evaluated.

Spatial and journey metaphors

In line with dominant metaphors within the careers literature participants make frequent reference to both spatial (Gunz, 1989) and journey (Nicholson and West, 1989) metaphors. Despite such 'old' metaphors being judged by some to be outmoded (e.g. Parker and Inkson, 1999; Herriot, 1992, Mirvis and Hall, 1996; Savickas, 2000) these and other dominant metaphors are found to be very much in vogue for participants in this study. Notions of vertical mobility are central to many accounts, with the terms 'career ladders' and 'steps' especially prevalent. For example Alison, a second-line manager, explains:

I've been here six years and in the six years I've done... five jobs. Each of them have been a step up the career ladder, so I think I have got a career and... I know where I'm going next so in my view that's what I believe [a career is]... I can see the natural steps.

Gillian remembers her earlier career thoughts:

When you graduate you think you're going to go up this ladder, there are steps along the way.... You're looked to for guidance from peers and people who are coming up the ladder behind you.

Amanda, a software developer, bemoans the continued absence of career opportunities for technical specialists:

There are very few people high up on the technical ladder..... I think they're still trying to figure out how to have the genuine technical ladder, with lots of people on it.

Cathy, also a software developer, laments the descent on the ladder motherhood triggered:

I went on maternity leave and I guess I've taken a step back.

Signified by the use of spatial career metaphors, vertical mobility remains a key dimension in participants' career conceptions. Indeed so crucial is this dimension to conceptions of career that new mothers who are unable to progress vertically interpret this as the 'end' of their career. Similarly, technical specialists who cannot see an obvious technical career ladder struggle to find ways to develop their career. These vertical notions are encapsulated in traditional and bureaucratic career conceptions suggesting that, here at least, they are far from dead.

In addition to ladders and steps there is frequent reference to paths (Herriot, 1992), roads and avenues, reflecting journey type metaphors (Nicholson and West, 1989) and signifying the retention of the earliest meanings of the word career as a road or carriageway (Arthur and Lawrence, 1984). Many participants talk either of their desire to be selected for or their experiences of actually being identified for the "fast

path.” Others have difficulty identifying any clear paths but still retain the journey metaphor in their conceptualisations of career. For example, Siobhan says:

No, there's no real, there's no career path..... I just sort of looked for different avenues, different things.

Sue feels she is at a “crossroads” as she contemplates leaving the organisation to take up a career in teaching. Peter too feels in a similar position, explaining:

I mean I'm on the cusp at the moment as to which way to go.

Earlier it was noted that the same metaphor can be read in different ways.

Participants’ use of metaphors certainly reflects this. On the one hand there are those who talk of ladders and paths in positive ways. For example Alison talks of all the steps up the ladder she has made and the “nice path” she is on, Bethany recalls fondly her early career when she was on a “fast path.” In contrast there are those whose experiences signify a less positive interpretation. Cathy talks of having to take a “step back” since becoming a mother, as does Linda who feels she has “reached a dead end”, Graham feels he has “plateaued” and is being “pulled backwards” since becoming a father. Amanda has always felt unsure about which path she should be travelling on, Gillian feels she lacks direction and sees it as a mixed blessing that career is “not that mapped out for you”, Leanne is unhappy about being “channelled down this road” she doesn’t want to travel. Thus whilst participants may draw on similar metaphors to express their experiences, the meanings individuals attach to them are not uniform. Journeys can be easy and quick or complicated, arduous and

long. Whilst most pursue career by attempting to climb the ladder, many meet obstructions and restrictions in their attempts to do so. Both paths and roads have, it seems, dead ends. Similarly, ladders have plateaus and ceilings.

Though these metaphors highlight key dimensions of participants' career conceptions, it is important to offer a full reading of the metaphor in order that, as Tietze et al (2003) have warned, one revelation doesn't obscure another.

Continuing with the journey-type metaphors, reference is made to notions of flying with many referring to the notion of being a "high-flier". In addition driving metaphors are widely-used by participants. There are again reflections of positive and more negative career experiences with different 'spins' detectable on the same type of metaphor. For example, many describe the process of 'driving' or being driven by others. Adam believes it possible though not easy to "steer your own [career] path" and Nick feels that he has had to "drive" his career "really hard." Ruth believes that in the first few years of a career the organisation has to "drive" it. Joanne explains at first that she is "driving" and latterly that the organisation is driving her through a process, clearly unsure whether she is driver or driven, at the wheel of her own career or a passenger of somebody else's. Echoing Cathy's report of having to take a step back on the ladder since becoming a mother, Siobhan's assessment of the impact of motherhood on her career is similar but along 'driving' lines:

I think at the moment I'm having to take a back seat for a few years.

There are also references to travel related obstructions. For example, William describes promotion from one level to a first line manager level as a ‘bottleneck’ and notes his own reaction to being awarded his promotion:

Perhaps sub-consciously I slightly took my foot off the pedal. You know, oh, right. Got [my promotion] now.

The speed at which one travels career-wise is seen as important. Ruth who has suffered ill-health in recent months describes herself as “plodding” relative to her colleagues and friends because of the inevitable impact of her illness. She explains:

I’m gonna have to, kind of, like, change gear... but I’ve had that time to, sort of, settle in a bit... so changing gear isn’t a problem....

Hinting at the notion of career as unstable movement in line with the ‘careering about’ definition of career (Arthur et al, 1999), Peter refers to his career as:

A roller coaster

This simple phrase allows access to a rich description of Peter’s career experiences, symbolising the highs and lows and twists of turns of his career to date. Drawing on an additional metaphor in conjunction with this one sheds further light on what features of a roller coaster Peter feels are apt to his experiences. Reflecting a feeling that his career is all pre-determined, Peter refers to what he sees as a:

Career conveyerbelt.

Taken together these two metaphors, along with the other negative spins on journey and spatial metaphors, hint further at dimensions of career which the literature neglects notably the insecurity and instability which participants experience as well as the barriers which they come up against which serve to restrict, obstruct and control the speed and direction of their career development.

Horticultural metaphors

Horticultural metaphors widely adopted in the careers literature are reflected further in participants' metaphors-in-use. As Gunz (1989) argued, there is a particular spin on this type of metaphor with the controlling and disciplining capacities of the 'gardener' being highlighted. In line with this interpretation, Asif for example describes the organisation as "not a company for people who want to grow fast" and he explains:

I... want to grow in an organisation and grow in terms of progressing promotions... I want to grow and grow faster. I'm not happy with [the organisation] offering me this pace of growth. I'm not happy with this pace. It's just very slow for me.

To Asif, it is the organisation offering and controlling his rate of growth rather than allowing him to do so himself. Other participants see themselves as performing the role of gardener which Gunz (1989) has described. Alison for example feels it is very much part of her role to "grow our people" by giving a select group of them opportunities. Ruth's manager has told her the ways he wants to see her grow rather

than allowing her to decide for herself. David concludes that as an organisational member within this particular setting:

You're just a mushroom in a damp corner of an office..... you are...a corporate mushroom.

Though participants express their desire to 'grow', as David's description illustrates, many are faced with hazards which stunt this growth. In line with the 'negative' spins on journey and spatial metaphors in which participants explain the ways in which their movement upwards is blocked, their journeys are closely directed and made more arduous, horticultural metaphors are adopted in a similar manner drawing attention again to the controlling elements of career.

Competition metaphors

The competition career metaphor (Van Maanen, 1977; Rosenbaum, 1989; Gowler and Legge, 1989) is also a widely used one amongst participants. These metaphors embrace notions of career which include reference to winners and losers, cheats, as well as 'sporting' injuries suffered as a result of competition.

The competitive element of careers is a source of some distress to several participants. Connected to Rosenbaum's (1979) tournaments, Joanne finds it especially "daunting" that others will be able to analyse performance relative to her university peers and experiences pressure to be seen to out-perform them. Sue explains:

It's very competitive... to get promotions and just various jobs. There's a lot of competition, which wouldn't suit everybody.

Joanne expresses concern that others may perceive her manager's decision to promote her recently as unfair:

[Some managers would say] I've already made opportunities for you - you're jumping the gun.

Joanne is thus aware that some colleagues may perceive that she has in some way cheated by being given the gift of (rather than earning) a head-start in the race. She is preoccupied with concerns about being seen to be:

on an equal playing field with everybody else

Reflecting further sporting metaphors, referring to an absence of promotion criteria, Bethany complains:

There's no goal posts to go towards.

In the absence of clear criteria participants attempt to make their own assessments of career rules and devise their own tactics accordingly. William stresses how imperative it is not to be seen to “drop the ball” and Nick cautions against being seen to spend too long “on the bench” i.e. between projects without any substantial role. Peter describes the various “clubs” that exist at the company and how getting ahead is about

finding a club to join. Similar career tactics or, as Herriot (1992) refers to them, ‘game plans’ are echoed widely in others’ accounts. For example, Ruth’s ‘game plan’ includes cultivating useful contacts within the company, to boost her career resources in terms of who she knows. Ruth refers to having a colleague who has rated her and offered her several jobs internally as:

Always a useful card to have in my back pocket.

Ruth also refers to the offers which this colleague has tried to tempt her with as “the card [my colleague] played.” In other words, the options which Ruth has attempted to maintain are seen as possible ‘turns’ or ‘moves’ in a card game. Continuing with the sporting metaphor, Ruth’s advice to others and explanations about her own career tactics include the need to “hit the ground running” and she explains:

You’ve got to be really kind of, on the ball, and watch everything.

Keith too talks about what you need to do before you get [career] things started i.e.

kick off the ball.

Amanda refers to the term “rat-race” noted by Gowler and Legge (1989) as does David who explains:

Most people are sort of like all in a rat-race and scrabbling up together.

Continuing with race-related language, and again leveraging open a negative ‘take’ on the competition metaphor, Cathy refers to falling behind her peers salary-wise and falling behind still further because of motherhood. Several participants refer to the existence of career ‘traps’. This resonates with concerns expressed by others through the adoption of spatial, journey and horticultural metaphors. For example, as we have seen, some talk of their dismay at having to take a step back on the ladder, of hitting dead ends on their career journeys and of having their growth stunted by powerful others.

DISCIPLINE AND CONTROL - CAREERS AS POLITICAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS?

The review of participants’ metaphors-in-use so far has revealed the continued widespread adoption of established metaphors, notably spatial, journey, horticultural and competition metaphors. There are however negative ‘spins’ or interpretations of these running alongside limited positive takes. Much of the careers literature, in particular the ‘new’ careers literature, all but ignores such critical insights. On the basis of the metaphor analysis conducted thus far there is therefore a gap between much academic commentary on the one hand and the career experiences of participants in this study on the other. The adequacy of both established metaphors prevalent in the careers literature and the latest contributions to career theory in terms of the extent to which they reflect the full experience and conceptual schemes of those having careers are further called into question by the ‘unveiling’ of what is by far the largest group of metaphors-in-use: those which are directly suggestive of controlling and disciplinary dimensions to career. Under this broad umbrella falls metaphors

relating to: career as imprisonment; military metaphors; school-like surveillance; ‘Wild West’; and nautical metaphors. This section outlines these new metaphors in detail.

On becoming a Lifer – career as imprisonment

Many participants refer to the concept of ‘becoming a Lifer’. Some are frightened of becoming a Lifer whereas others suspect they may already have become one. The literal definition of a ‘Lifer’ is of course someone with a life sentence to imprisonment. In its metaphorical form, the meaning is little different, reflecting notions of a lifetime of entrapment with little possibility of escape – the product of the pursuit of career. This imagery of serving a sentence and being imprisoned is woven throughout others’ accounts. For example, Gillian talks about having been lucky to “escape” from her first role. Peter refers to his life at the organisation and his thoughts about retirement:

It's a bit like doing a prison sentence, planning my release date because, you know, that's when you're going to get parole.

Unlike those who are involuntary prisoners, ‘Lifers’ may be seen to have voluntarily and willingly devoted their lives to the organisation and the career cause akin to Whyte’s (1956) ‘Organization Man’ and in line with key features of the allegedly outmoded bureaucratic career (Kanter, 1989). Although they may feel trapped at times, the organisational prison and their career within it comes to be re-interpreted by some as offering them protection from the world outside. Becoming a ‘Lifer’ then is seen as a mixed blessing with advantages and disadvantages, pros and cons. The

longer they remain with the organisation, the more fearful of the world outside they appear to become. They lose confidence in their ability to survive in that 'other' world and turn to the safe, protective organisational world they know. It is at this point, from which there is little hope of return, that they become ensnared and transformed into 'Lifers', trapped in the company way, unable to imagine a life beyond it. Ruth illustrates this in part by outlining how her outlook has changed since her early days with the company transforming her into such a company person:

I was interviewed by an American and he said 'What you gonna do?' because we were only offered a four year fixed term contract. [He said] 'What you gonna do?' and I said 'Well with the skills I get out of you, go to [this company] in the U.S.' And he went 'Good answer!'.... Oh Christ, I never thought I'd stay here... I thought I'd do my four years and then go. Go and do something bigger and better, I never thought I'd be here... What I don't want to do is get entrenched in internal stuff and ... become a [company person] in the truest sense of the word... then I really would be worried... because..... I think I've probably turned into a [company person] really deep down inside... if you cut me I'd probably bleed blue pin stripe...(nervous laughter) but... I don't know ... I fight against it.

William explains what he understands the key characteristics of a 'Lifer' to be:

You know, you see a lot of them in the business. They get to a certain level and maybe their job priorities change, maybe they have a family or you know... maybe they just have outside interests, their own business or something and

just do the 9 to 5 and, you know, aren't really too concerned if they get a low appraisal because they've already got a salary which keeps them in, you know, in a... keeps them comfortable and they can have a lifestyle that they want. I... I don't think I've reached that. Well I know I haven't reached that stage yet.

However, unpacking William's account further leaves one wondering whether in fact he is already a 'Lifer' yet, illustrating the process working at its most efficient, is blissfully unaware of it. Talking about how he felt following his recent promotion to first-line manager equivalent, he explains:

It felt as though I'd arrived. Yes. But I hate that. I hate the thought that I might have done that, because it wasn't a conscious thing. I certainly didn't think right, I've got to that level now, sod it. I can... I can become a Lifer now..... I'm very comfortable. I can stay here for the rest of my life. And actually I'm not uncomfortable with that. I don't feel I have to go outside.

One is left puzzled at claims that Whyte's (1956) 'Organization Man' has walked out of the corporation's doors for good (e.g. Littleton et al, 2000). It seems, at this company at least, (s)he has not, nor indeed once a 'Lifer', is (s)he able to.

Military metaphors

Linked closely to the imprisonment type metaphors, a complex military metaphor appears in participants' accounts. Participants make reference to, for example, battles, fighting, wearing body armour, being drilled, regimented, tending wounds, digging in, waving flags (of surrender), and parachuting to safety from the company plane.

Exploring first some of the language used in this military sense, Graham refers to his tendency to try and avoid “political battles” and expresses grave concerns about the impact on his career of what he sees as his lack of “a kit bag of technical skills.” Though he has contemplated leaving the company, illustrating increasing feelings of insecurity, and drawing on powerful imagery, Graham confesses:

I don't know what I would write on my flag if I... or on my parachute I think.

What would be on my parachute if I jumped out of the company plane and said here I come, this is what I've got.

The military metaphors do not stop there. For example, there are frequent references to (not) sending people “through the ranks” which may help shed further light on the experiences of women in this study, particularly those with children. For example, Alison informs us:

I don't think there's a culture of pushing [women] through the ranks.

According to Siobhan, this is not a feature exclusive to this particular organisation. Referring to her previous organisation, she explains:

They were only looking for one sort of really tough person to sort of send through the ranks. I also thought it was quite a male thing.

Military operations are by and large male-dominated and it is senior and almost exclusively male officers who select who to send through the ranks. As Janowitz (1968) has noted in his study of military careers, all is left for the 'soldier' is to attempt to draw attention to himself by demonstrating his suitability and similarity by displaying obedience and conformity. Indeed, 'senior officers' and 'generals' exist at the organisation too. David notes the tactics of the 'general' of his Division:

The guy at the top... He is very, very power-oriented. He's... I guess he's like Napoleon in a way. He's got all of his lieutenants around him and he's had some real high-fliers, you know, sort of about 40 years old. They were coming through the ranks, first degrees from Cambridge and Oxford – high-fliers. They all mysteriously disappeared on assignments to the four corners of the world because once they're out, they can't question his authority.

Those jostling for position then are thrown into battle with each other. The need to fight at various stages is highlighted by several people including Bethany who decides it is easier to accept the adverse impact of motherhood on careers rather than attempt to challenge the status quo. She explains:

It will just be a source of stress for me... to try and fight it.

In contrast, others are provoked into action by what they perceive as unfair practices. Gillian for example talks about having witnessed numerous unwarranted promotions amongst those around her and explains:

To a certain extent it can make you fight even harder because you feel aggrieved.

Ruth too has had to fight before and is prepared to do the same again:

I will....fight my corner and I will... dig in if I believe what I'm doing is right...If I believe that I'm right and I believe... in what I'm fighting for... then I will fight it tooth and nail.

Bethany describes “lots of sniping” between her and one of her managers. Referring to her time in a managerial position and her attempts to protect her staff from demands from managers above, she explains:

[As a first line manager] you just say my people aren't doing that until you tell me why. And so you take that sort of flack so... you're almost like a body armour for your people... or you can be.

Here Bethany reveals that managers can also act to protect those they are responsible for and it is not a simple matter of direction and control from above.

The military metaphor is not restricted to careers within the organisation it seems, but incorporates experiences of careers outside too. Sue refers to her previous employer and explains that:

The career progression there was quite regimented... you did like 2 years at every grade.

Almost as though even a drill sergeant would have been unable to get through to her to prevent her doing her own thing, and demonstrating her refusal to 'take orders', Sue remembers the reactions she got when she went against such orders and opted for a vocational rather than academic qualification:

I got some real ear-bashings about it.

Others participants seem less able to stand up to such 'ear-bashings'. Demonstrating tactics to ensure organisational members think the organisational way, Joanne observes:

I'm mixing with people within the software group and they are drilled to the nth degree - 'this is where we're going!!' - because obviously they've got to be speaking it every minute of the day.

Of course all of these battles and fighting and 'ear-bashings' take their toll leading to a range of injuries. Peter, for example, refers to his early experience of redundancy at the age of 18:

I took redundancy at 18, 18 ½ which is quite a big blow... going back to college was quite an easy alternative to uh sort of lick my wounds and recover a little.

Frequent reorganisations and restructuring also, as Peter notes, take their toll:

We're still seeing an awful lot of fallout [from a recent reorganisation].

These various spins on the military metaphor again highlight features of career and its context which are in sharp contrast to the rather rosy pictures portrayed within the existing careers (especially 'new' careers) literature. The political, controlling and disciplining dimensions to career are to the fore here. Other metaphors-in-use uncover similar dimensions.

Career as school-like surveillance

Reflecting a further panoptic (Foucault, 1977) dimension to careers are metaphors which fall broadly under a heading of 'school-like surveillance'. These parent-child (akin to master-servant and general-soldier) type metaphors appear to reflect the maintenance of an essentially paternalistic culture in which the adults (cast here as managers) have authority over the children (cast as employees) and retain the right to issue orders to them. This is in line with the parent-child analogy which Ackers (1998) has used to explain the key features of paternalism. Participants feel that they are constantly being evaluated as either 'good' or 'bad' and are constantly striving to be judged as the former. Part and parcel of getting on career-wise at the organisation is accepting their position as a child relative to their manager's parental role, demonstrating subservience to powerful others. This is in stark contrast to the autonomous self-directing imagery presented within the new careers literature. Whilst

participants may not always like the situation, many nevertheless find themselves playing along with it. As noted earlier, Amanda for example complains that managers:

Have a lot of secrets and they won't treat employees like grown ups.

Keith is irritated by ways in which career progress is secured:

To me a lot of it is not your job, it's just being a nice boy to management.

Gillian complains about the rather more overt managerial 'disciplinary gaze' (Foucault, 1977; Fournier, 1998; Savage, 1998) which she has found herself under:

You don't want someone looking over your shoulder all the time and saying why are you doing it that way, why are you doing it like that? Treating you like a schoolgirl or whatever.

Cathy, in contrast admits that she was initially dependent on positive feedback from significant others that she was being 'good' and describes her struggle to retain her confidence when such feedback was withheld. She explains:

It's like with a child. If you say 'you're really good' they tend to do better. But if you're just being ignored you tend to kind of go off on your own... I mean now it probably wouldn't bother me so much if I wasn't told that I was good, in fact it wouldn't. I've more confidence in myself and I'd know whether what I've

done is bad or good. But when I first joined the company I think I needed more kind of positive help.

The fact that Cathy is now able to evaluate herself as being ‘bad’ or ‘good’ may signal in part evidence of self-managed self-discipline (Grey, 1994). Cathy has since learnt how a good child behaves and how a bad child behaves and no longer requires other ‘parental’ managerial figures to tell her.

Demonstrating consistently ‘good’ behaviour is a pre-condition of becoming a ‘grown up’ or manager within the company. Alison, now a second-line ‘parental’ figure refers to her staff who have “grown up in the organisation”. Her perspective is echoed in Ruth’s experiences. She confesses:

I know I'm very much a baby[here]...

Ruth notes how her manager has rewarded her contribution to date, telling her:

Let's capitalise on that by making you do the... the more grown up stuff.

Relishing the prospect of a new challenge, Ruth nevertheless reports anxiety at having to ‘grow up’:

The graduate unit is just an extension of student life really, whereas when you go up to... I always nicknamed it the grown-up unit... things just aren't the same.

Like the ‘Lifers’ who come to interpret their ‘prison’ as some kind of protective cocoon, so too might others come to see the advantages to remaining ‘a baby’ as securing the ongoing care and protection of parental figures.

William’s perspective is along similar lines but instead of the child-parent analogy he draws parallels between life at the organisation and life at public school, seeing himself as the pupil and his managers as the school-masters:

If you like it’s similar to being at boarding school because that’s sort of one big organisation and if you’ve been there a long time you get to know a lot of people.

Once again such metaphors highlight the political, controlling and disciplining dimensions of career which the careers literature all but ignores.

Career as life in the Wild West

Continuing on a similar theme, references to ‘Wild West’ type metaphors are frequent. As with other metaphors, there are a number of dimensions to the Wild West one. The imagery conjured up here is again of good and bad guys (rather than children) in addition to outsiders, along with the activities of shooting yourself in the foot, watching your back, being ‘sheep-dipped’ and breaking people in.

‘Good guys’ are not necessarily just men but the absence of the feminine equivalent is perhaps a telling omission in the context of restricted opportunities for some women,

particularly new mothers. Good guys are those individuals seen as the kind of successful, day-saving, top performers. As David explains:

You do get good guys who go onto bad things to patch it up.

The Wild West metaphor also highlights the detrimental effects of going against established if largely tacit career rules. Alison who has decided to retain her maiden name following her recent marriage for example expresses the view:

I'd be shooting myself in the foot if, you know, I just sort of wiped away [my reputation].

Similarly, Bethany refers to her honesty about the possibility that she may have more children as:

Shooting myself in the foot but I... I can't lie to them.

The Wild West metaphor also reveals the notion of “outsiders” and the risks that come with being (or being considered to be) one. Alison recounts a warning she received on her promotion to second-line management:

I was... slotted in as a sort of outsider, sort of thing, just bunged into the position, and somebody said to me, I can remember very briefly, be careful, watch your back, sort of thing, because you might have unknowingly pushed a few noses out of joint.

Reflecting the political nature of appointments within this organisation, Alison is warned that others may seek revenge for what they see as an unfair and unwarranted promotion. The fighting activity central to the military metaphor is echoed here too. William for example explains why he would rather remain a professional than become a line manager:

I've had people tell me that being a first-line manager is a pretty rotten old job because you get beaten up from above and you get beaten up from below.

Referring to the conformity which is demanded at the organisation and the extent of 'cloning' related activity which goes on as a result, as well as hinting at the extent to which newcomers are 'disinfected' of all that they may have picked up from elsewhere, David admits that:

To a certain extent you do get sheep-dipped.

Sheep-dipping involves washing away dirt and infectious material from animals. All sheep are put through the sheep wash since if one remained infected there would be a strong risk of it infecting all the others. The "sheep-dipping" process is thus understood as serving the purpose of removing threats to the 'organisation way' from those who may carry beliefs and habits picked up from outside experiences. Cathy worries that she may already have been sheep-dipped, alarmed at the thought she may have already been herded up and become what she refers to as:

The corporate animal

The corporate animal in this context is one who is trainable, malleable, eager to please and accepting of rules of engagement. Such sheep-dipping, cloning activity is not however exclusively a top-down process but can operate in reverse. As Linda notes:

I've broken in a lot of managers which I don't like doing.

Nautical career metaphors

Like the metaphors reviewed so far there are again several dimensions to the nautical metaphor. First are the fairly straightforward journey-type inclusions relating to the charting and mapping of career progress. However, the controlling, disciplining and 'drowning' spin to this metaphor offers the most powerful imagery, indicating feelings of fear and insecurity as being central to career conceptions for participants in this study. For example, there are frequent references to the importance of not rocking the boat for fear of the consequences, the experience of floundering, being channelled by others, treading water, coasting helplessly, being caught or trapped on hooks, bailing out and even drowning.

It all starts, according to David, with the promise of career:

They [a previous employer] said the world's your oyster if you become an accountant.

And in order that the promise is kept alive, there are things which must be done, rules which must be followed and directions which must be pursued. To steady the ship and stay on course David has assured those around him:

I'm not going to rock the boat because things sound like they're going to happen.

William too has felt it important not to challenge the status quo for fear he may lose everything. Recalling his arrival at the organisation, he recalls:

I was... anxious not to rock the boat and to impress.

Gillian likewise believes it is important to select a course and then commit to it, whatever the consequences. She says:

I think you have to work out what's important to you and stick with it and you know... come hell or high water

This unswerving commitment to a particular course of action can be understood as contributing to the maintenance of a set of rules and career behaviours, regardless of whether these are in one's own interests. In line with this, and despite their fears and insecurities, no protest is made when individuals find themselves sinking. Ruth talks of situations she's been "thrown into." Bethany, referring to a role she was placed in by her manager against her wishes, explains:

It was the first time I've really been flung in the deep end.

William has even come to re-interpret such career experiences as in his best interests:

If I'm sort of thrown in at the deep end but that's probably the best thing for me.

Leanne however has been left feeling anxious in the role she is in:

I've sort of been left in this position without much training at all really. I've just been floundering.

There is on one level a feeling of floundering or drowning which is not uncommon. On another level are the elements of one's life which have to be left to 'flounder' in order that career can be maintained. These frequently extend beyond the work environment to personal lives. As Ruth confesses:

I'd seen a couple of relationships flounder, simply because I just never was around.

Some, through their networks of contacts, have early warning systems in place to lessen the risk of drowning. For example, Graham recalls a colleague phoning him to advise:

It's looking a little bit dodgy. I would bail out now if I were you.

Ruth also talks of how she is frequently called on to ‘bail out’ drowning colleagues from difficult situations. On other occasions there is little one can do but bide one’s time and hope for the best. Linda explains what her career is currently like in these terms:

I’m just treading water at the moment.

Linda echoes Ruth’s earlier experience:

A few years ago I would have felt that I was treading water.

Reflecting the notion of entrapment conveyed in the ‘Lifer’ metaphor, Nick refers to his experience of becoming trapped on career ‘hooks’:

Various.... um hooks led me to decide [to move jobs within the organisation]some hooks dragged me into the organisation

The imagery here is of an individual being carefully ‘reeled in’ to the organisation and his or her career within it. This, along with the other nautical images presented here, point to, once again, the controlling and disciplining dimensions of career.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper the potential of metaphor to access conceptual systems (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and generate new conceptual insights (Alvesson, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Cazal and Inns, 1998; Tietze et al, 2003) has been taken advantage of and has ‘unveiled’ (Inkson, 2001) key aspects of career and its context. Metaphor has been found to litter participants’ accounts. The spatial, journey, horticultural and competition metaphors identified in the literature are all in evidence within participants’ ‘metaphors-in-use’. Thus the terms adopted by and conceptions held by those who commentate on career are, in part at least, transposed to and resonate with career actors’ accounts. It is not entirely clear why this is the case, by what process this occurs, nor why these metaphors have proved so enduring. What can be said with some certainty however is that the metaphors academics ‘live by’, to use Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) phrase, have become in part those participants in this study ‘live by’ too. Central to these established metaphors and therefore to participants’ career conceptions is the desire to ‘get ahead’ with speed. Thus for participants in this study a career, in ideal terms, involves climbing up, driving ahead, growing taller – and all with as much pace as is possible. Such conceptions tally with the key features of ‘old’ bureaucratic careers rendering claims of its demise, here at least, as inaccurate. That said, there are apparently gaps between the shape and form of what might be considered an ideal career and the shape and form of a career in practice.

Metaphors can be read in a number of different ways (Gowler and Legge, 1989). One can move up but also be forced to move down a career ladder. On a career journey one can travel along clearly signposted paths or meet obstructions, feel pushed down an unwanted route and lost. In terms of their usage of metaphor, most participants in this study dwell on the more negative rather than positive ‘takes’. The new careers

literature paints a far more rosy though, according to accounts here, inaccurate picture than this. There are, in addition, other groups of metaphors not acknowledged within the literature which reveal a dark less palatable side to career neglected in mainstream portrayals and entirely missing from both the ‘new’ and ‘old’ career literature. These additional metaphors - career as imprisonment, military metaphors, school-like surveillance, ‘Wild West’ and nautical metaphors - add to the small but growing body of evidence (e.g. Grey, 1994; Fournier, 1998) suggesting career may be better understood in terms of a politicised process in which discipline and control are key dimensions. In particular, the images peddled by the new career literature of free, autonomous and self-directing career actors have little to do with the experiences and subjective career interpretations of participants in this study. The metaphor analysis adopted in this paper has thus generated fresh insights into the concept of career and has facilitated the ‘unlocking’ of important but to date neglected dimensions to and key features of the concept. If we are to continue to refine our understanding of career, as researchers we must focus more on accessing the career experiences, subjective interpretations and conceptual schemes of those having careers and guard against imposing our own. Much more work is needed in order that the career ‘veil’ (Inkson, 2001) can be lifted further and new dialogue about career’s key dimensions as well as about the status of ‘new’ and ‘old’ careers can be triggered.

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Figure 1 – Participants’ Profiles

	Participant's name	Sex	Role	Age	Dependants	Years service at co.	Full/ part-time?
1.	Alison	F	Manager (2 nd -line)	28	None	7	Full
2.	Graham	M	Manager (1 st -line)	30	One	8	Full
3.	Sue	F	Technical Manager (1 st -line)	31	One	10	Part
4.	Amanda	F	Technical specialist	34	One	10	Part
5.	Asif	M	Technical specialist	30	None	5	Full
6.	Cathy	F	Technical specialist	31	One	9	Part
7.	Keith	M	Technical specialist	30	None	5	Full
8.	Linda	F	Technical specialist	30	None	8	Full
9.	Jane	F	Technical specialist	29	None	7	Full
10.	David	M	Specialist (Finance)	30	Two	5	Full
11.	Gillian	F	Specialist (Finance)	30	None	10	Full
12.	William	M	Specialist (HR)	28	None	5	Full
13.	Adam	M	Generalist	31	None	9	Full
14.	Nick	M	Generalist	30	None	5	Full
15.	Bethany	F	Generalist	30	Two	9	Part
16.	Siobhan	F	Generalist	31	One	3	Part
17.	Peter	M	Generalist	34	One	11	Full
18.	Ruth	F	Generalist	30	None	7	Full
19.	Leanne	F	Generalist	28	None	3	Full
20.	Joanne	F	Generalist	28	None	3	Full