



Becoming a ‘lifer’? Unlocking career through metaphor

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Despite growing interest in the adoption of metaphor analysis as a method of studying organizational and working life, there have been few, if any, empirical studies of career metaphors. Although 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. 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 politicized process in which discipline and control are key dimensions.

It is striking that although Foucault considers a remarkably wide array of disparate phenomena – from school examinations, military drills, medical quarantining and punishment though imprisonment, he never so much as mentions how the varied practices associated with the development of the ‘career’ might be seen in these terms (Savage, 1998, p. 66).

There has been growing interest in the adoption of metaphor analysis as a method of studying organizational life (e.g. Grant & Osrick, 1996; Morgan, 1986; Osrick & Grant, 1996; Tietze, Cohen, & Musson, 2003). Metaphor analysis has also been argued to offer a powerful tool in the study of careers (e.g. Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Gunz, 1989; Inkson, 2001; 2002; Mignot, 2000). Yet despite its promise, to date there have been few, if any, empirical studies of the career metaphors adopted by individuals having careers.

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Although career scholars have drawn on metaphors to help illuminate their own conceptions of career, the metaphors employed by those having careers and the conceptual insight this might generate has been all but ignored. The primary aim of this paper is to address this gap. Drawing on empirical evidence, the freely elicited 'metaphors-in-use' (Grant & Oswick, 1996) of graduate level employees within a large blue-chip corporation are analysed. The contribution these metaphors-in-use make to the conceptual debate about career is discussed and the utility of metaphor analysis in careers research assessed.

Making sense of and through metaphor

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 widely understood word or phrase on the other. Its function is to 'communicate the unknown by transposing it in terms of the known' (Gowler & Legge, 1989, p. 439). The utility of metaphor in helping make sense of organizational life has been perhaps most convincingly demonstrated by Morgan (1986) in his now seminal work, *Images of Organization*. Through a series of different metaphorical lenses, Morgan views organization variously as a machine, an organism, a brain, culture, a political system, a psychic prison, flux and transformation and an instrument of domination. In doing so, he generates new (critical) insights into (darker) aspects of organizational life. Morgan acknowledges, though does not accept, the criticism that metaphor is merely 'a device for embellishing discourse' (1986, p. 12). Metaphor, he argues, is far, far more significant than this and to dismiss it as such is to neglect a potentially powerful analytical tool.

According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980, p. 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.

Exploring the metaphors employed by organizational actors (rather than imposing metaphors as Morgan does) seems a particularly promising analytical endeavour in terms of revealing how individuals make sense of and conceptualize their careers. Miles and Huberman (1994) believe that metaphors encourage researchers to look beyond existing career concepts and models thereby, as Inkson (2001) puts it, helping to 'unveil' features currently obscured from view. Individuals, it is claimed, draw on metaphor to convey feelings and thoughts and to express experiences and emotions which might otherwise remain unspoken. Casal and Inns (1998, p. 179) point to the utility of metaphor in offering 'insights to hidden, barely conscious feelings' as do Miles and Huberman (1994). This 'generative capacity' of metaphor (Alvesson, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Tietze *et al.*, 2003) offers the possibility of accessing new conceptual insights. This is particularly useful in studies of career since there remains much heated debate about how this 'slippery' (Van Maanen, 1977, p. 1) concept should be understood. Mainstream portrayals of the concept have been criticized on a number of grounds, including for offering uncritical (Grey, 1994; Van Maanen, 1977) and apolitical portrayals of career (Collin & Young, 2000). Metaphor analysis promises to help address some of these limitations. For example, according to Mignot (2000), it offers a way of exploring not only how individuals construct career but also the ways in which they are constrained by it, heightening

the prospect of gaining critical leverage so lacking in studies to date. Even the most commonplace metaphors can communicate to us the taken for granted (and frequently tacit) conditions and features of organizational life that may escape critical scrutiny (Tietze *et al.*, 2003). Simply taking a fresh look at these well-established 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) can generate new perspectives (Alvesson, 1994).

Mignot (2000) and Tietze *et al.* (2003) see another advantage of metaphor analysis to be potential to access situational and context-specific meanings. Career is not separate to but entwined with the context in which it is played out. In their career accounts, individuals inevitably talk about the contours of the career landscape, and the career metaphors they employ thus convey something about the individual agent, as well as the structural features of their careers. This feature of metaphor is potentially very useful since empirical studies of career have been criticized for being decontextualized (Collin, 1997).

Method

Derived from a broader qualitative study of career in context, the evidence presented in this paper is based on the unstructured interview accounts of 20 (8 male and 12 female) graduate level employees drawn from a range of job functions, levels and UK locations within a large multi-national blue-chip corporation renowned for its strong paternalistic culture. Like many of its competitors, in response to turbulent market conditions, the organization in this study faced dramatic change during the 1990s, undergoing a series of large-scale downsizing and restructuring programmes accompanied by cultural change initiatives. The company's long-standing commitment to lifetime employment has been (publicly at least) withdrawn and efforts have been made to encourage employees to embrace the notion of self-managed careers. Company documents describe an organization 'completely free of limitations' and a culture in which employees are 'free to succeed on their own terms'.

There remains a large core of permanent staff from which participants in this study are drawn. Their work roles fall into four broad groups: managers, technical specialists, functional specialists, and generalists. All participants have (at least) a degree level qualification. Their average age is 30 years (the youngest is 28 and the oldest 34 years). Figure 1 offers a profile of participants along with a summary of the metaphors contained within their career accounts, classed broadly into two groups - 'established' and new 'disciplinary' metaphors. It is worth noting here that although two participants (Asif and Jane) draw only on 'established' metaphors, like all other participants, both also highlight disciplinary features of career within their accounts. Asif uses, in particular, the horticultural metaphor to do so and Jane refers in literal rather than metaphorical terms to such features.

Interviews were launched with a single request of the participant - 'tell me about your 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, p. 189) point out that 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.

	Name	Role	Age	Dependents	Years at co.	Full/part-time?	Established Metaphors				New Disciplinary Career Metaphors				
							Spatial	Journey	Competition	Horticultural	Prison	Military	School-like surveillance	Wild West	Nautical
1.	Alison	Manager (2 nd -line)	28	None	7	Full	X	X	X	X		X	X		X
2.	Graham	Manager	30	One	8	Full	X	X	X	X		X	X		X
3.	Sue	Technical Manager	31	One	10	Part	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
4.	Amanda	Technical specialist	34	One	10	Part	X	X	X				X		
5.	Asif	Technical specialist	30	None	5	Full	X	X	X	X					
6.	Cathy	Technical specialist	31	One	9	Part	X		X		X		X		
7.	Keith	Technical specialist	30	None	5	Full		X	X				X	X	X
8.	Linda	Technical specialist	30	None	8	Full		X	X					X	X
9.	Jane	Technical specialist	29	None	7	Full		X	X						
10.	David	Specialist (Finance)	30	Two	5	Full	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
11.	Gillian	Specialist (Finance)	30	None	10	Full	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
12.	William	Specialist (HR)	28	None	5	Full	X	X	X		X	X		X	X
13.	Adam	Generalist	31	None	9	Full		X	X	X	X		X		X
14.	Nick	Generalist	30	None	5	Full		X							X
15.	Bethany	Generalist	30	Two	9	Part		X	X			X	X		X
16.	Siobhan	Generalist	31	One	3	Part	X	X	X		X				
17.	Peter	Generalist	34	One	11	Full		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
18.	Ruth	Generalist	30	None	7	Full		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
19.	Leanne	Generalist	28	None	3	Full		X					X	X	X
20.	Joanne	Generalist	28	None	3	Full	X	X	X	X		X			
TOTAL							11	18	18	10	7	11	11	9	14

Figure 1. Participants' profiles.

Methodologically, the approach adopted here is a critical-interpretive one (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Critically reflecting on career as seen 'through the eyes of the beholder' (Van Maanen, 1977, p. 174) is deemed crucial. 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 - word by word, line by line - for metaphors. After several iterations of this process, the metaphors generated by participants that shared similar properties and themes were grouped together. As Fig. 1 shows, all participants in this study employ metaphor in their career accounts. Tietze *et al.* (2003) note how metaphor can highlight certain features of a phenomenon, whilst simultaneously obscuring others. Gowler and Legge (1989) observe the positive and negative interpretations that a single metaphor may encapsulate and urge researchers to look for both. Collin (1997) and Morgan (1986)

warn of the partial insights generated by a single metaphor and recommend that a number of metaphors are explored. This advice is heeded here. The proceeding analysis outlines all of the metaphors which participants employ. The data presented are selected in order to offer a full reading of the particular metaphor and the dimensions of career and context that metaphor is used to describe.

Established career metaphors

The analysis begins by examining the extent to which the dominant career metaphors within the literature – which fall into four broad groups: spatial, journey, competition, and horticultural metaphors – are reflected in participants' career accounts. Spatial career metaphors draw attention to entrenched notions of vertical mobility with frequent reference to, for example, hierarchies, pyramids, career ladders, high-flyers and so on (Barley, 1989; Gunz, 1989). The word 'career' is derived from the Latin word *carraria* meaning a road or carriageway (Arthur & Lawrence, 1984, p. 1) which might in part explain the widespread adoption of journey metaphors (Nicholson & West, 1989) which frame careers as, for example, travel along 'paths' (Herriot, 1992). In Ancient Greece, the term career meant a 'fast paced running of a course – some sort of race' (Van Maanen, 1977, p. 1) and notions of career as a competitive 'tournament' (Rosenbaum, 1979), 'uphill struggle' or 'rat race' on a 'fast track' (Gowler & Legge, 1989) derive from this. Gunz (1989) notes the use of horticultural metaphors in the careers literature conjuring both positive career images of growing, flowering and blossoming as well as negative ones such as being pruned and cut back.

Turning attention to an analysis of participants' career metaphors-in-use, Gunz's (1989) observation that, in their career accounts, individuals draw heavily on metaphor for descriptive purposes proves an accurate one here. In line with dominant metaphors within the careers literature, participants make frequent reference to spatial, journey, competition, and horticultural metaphors.

Spatial and journey metaphors

Despite 'old' spatial metaphors being judged by some to be outmoded (e.g. Herriot, 1992, Mirvis & Hall, 1996; Parker & Inkson, 1999; Savickas, 2000), they are found to be very much in vogue for 11 of the 20 participants in this study. Notions of vertical mobility are central to these accounts, with the terms 'career ladders' and 'steps' especially prevalent. For example Alison, a second-line manager, explains:

I've been here 6 years and in the 6 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.

Eighteen of the 20 participants draw on journey metaphors in their talk of careers. Reference is made variously to: flying, driving and steering; paths, tracks, roads, and avenues; crossroads and turning points; maps and charts; meeting dead ends and getting lost.

Spatial and journey metaphors are employed to communicate positive and, more commonly, negative career experiences. 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'. Much effort is directed to getting on the 'fast path' or 'fast track' and, once on it, much energy expended and anxiety experienced trying to stay on it.

The speed at which one travels career-wise and the distance covered are seen as important with tacit notions of what is acceptable and unacceptable. 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, explaining how she has had to 'change gear' while recuperating. She is anxious about the catching up she has to do. Conversely, having secured a promotion ahead of his ambitious planned schedule, William describes how he 'perhaps subconsciously slightly took his foot off the pedal' feeling able to slow things down and relax for a little while before continuing his career journey.

Participants have mixed views about the extent to which they can (or indeed want to) self-manage and self-direct their career journeys. Joanne, for example, explains at first that she is 'driving' and latterly that the organization is driving her career, unsure whether she is at the wheel or a passenger of her own career. Amanda has always felt uncertain about which path she should be travelling on. Gillian too feels that she lacks direction and sees it as a mixed blessing that career is 'not that mapped out for you', sometimes seemingly wanting to be given a clear map to follow. Leanne, in contrast, is unhappy about being directed 'down this road' she does not want to travel.

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, symbolizing the highs and lows and twists of turns of his career to date. Peter also refers to the 'career conveyer-belt' he feels he is on. Though the feature of circularity pertains to both the view of career as a roller coaster and a conveyer belt, the latter lacks the excitement and contrasts and is a much more monotonous affair. Despite his best efforts to make progress in his career, Peter feels he is travelling round and round in circles – going nowhere and with nowhere to go. This feeling is echoed by others. The advent of parenthood appears to hamper career development, triggering considerable frustration and resentment. All five female participants who have recently become mothers feel their careers have halted as a result. Cathy talks of taking a 'step back', Siobhan describes 'having to take a back seat for a few years' and Linda feels she has 'reached a dead end'. Graham, who feels he has 'plateaued' and is being 'pulled backwards' since becoming a father, is the only one of three fathers in the study whose experiences resonate with new mothers'.

Competition metaphors

The competition career metaphor is widely used with 18 of the 20 participants embracing notions of career that include reference to winners, losers, and cheats, as well as injuries suffered as a result of competition. Sue explains:

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

Amanda refers to the career 'rat race' as does David who explains:

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

This politically charged imagery of career is echoed elsewhere. Joanne is torn between wanting to be seen 'on an equal playing field with everybody else' and any promotion thus being interpreted as fair and warranted, whilst finding the prospect that her peers might out perform her as 'daunting'. Feeling pressure to progress quickly (as William and Ruth above do) she secures a head start in the career race by accepting

a promotion from her manager which she feels others are more deserving of. She worries:

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

Echoing the uncertainty conveyed via journey metaphors about where career efforts should be directed, referring to an absence of promotion criteria with a sporting metaphor, Bethany complains:

There's no goal posts to go towards.

In the absence of clear criteria, participants try to devise appropriate 'game plans' (Herriot, 1992). William stresses how important it is not to be seen to 'drop the ball' and Nick cautions against spending too long 'on the bench' i.e. between projects without any real visible work to do. Ruth has been offered roles within another department by an old acquaintance. Although she has so far declined the offers, she describes them as 'always a useful card to have in my back pocket'. She sees these career options as possible 'turns' or 'moves' in a card game.

Horticultural metaphors

Horticultural metaphors appear in the career accounts of 10 of the 20 participants and, notably, they are all inclined to describe the controlling and disciplining capacities of the 'gardener' or manager (noted by Gunz, 1989) able to assist as well as stunt their growth. Alison, a second-line manager, 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. Asif describes the organization as 'not a company for people who want to grow fast' and explains:

I want to grow in an organization and grow in terms of progressing promotions. I want to grow and grow faster. I'm not happy with [the organization] 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 organization offering and controlling his rate of growth rather than allowing him to do so himself. David concludes that as an organizational 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, the opportunity for them to self-manage this growth seems limited. The experience of pursuing career in a setting likened to that which mushrooms grow suggests a far from pleasant experience. 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, participants employ horticultural metaphors to describe the hazards which they feel stunt their growth.

Disciplinary career metaphors

Having explored the use of established career metaphors, attention is turned now to those metaphors-in-use not acknowledged in the literature - imprisonment, military, school-like surveillance, Wild West, and nautical metaphors - 'unlocking' in turn disciplinary dimensions of career.

Becoming a 'lifer' – career as imprisonment

Imprisonment metaphors are drawn on by seven of the 20 participants in this study. The imagery of serving a sentence and being imprisoned is woven throughout these accounts. For example, Gillian talks about having been lucky to 'escape' from a role she felt trapped in. Peter refers to his career to date within the organization 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.

Four participants refer to becoming a 'lifer'. 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. However, unlike those who are involuntary prisoners, here a 'lifer', who is a devoted 'company person' through and through, voluntarily and willingly devotes their life to the organization and the career cause. The process of transformation to a 'lifer' is an insidious one. Ruth describes how her outlook has evolved since her early days with the company:

I was interviewed by an American and he said, 'What you gonna do?' because we were only offered a 4 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 4 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 . . . 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.

Ruth reflects here how she has gradually morphed into a company person, planning a long-term future within the company, her identity entwined and enmeshed with it. It is only upon reflection that Ruth begins to identify herself in this way. William too has difficulty recognizing his transformation. At first, he says:

You see a lot of them ['lifera'] in the business . . . I don't think I've reached that. Well I know I haven't reached that stage yet.

Talking about how he felt following his recent promotion, 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 become a lifer now.

However, one is left wondering whether in fact he has indeed become a 'lifer' and yet, illustrating the process working at its most efficient, is blissfully unaware of it when, later in his account, he declares:

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.

At odds with company policy, William feels he has a job for life. He, like other partially or fully fledged 'lifera', expresses little desire to escape and indeed sees no need to do so.

Military metaphors

Military metaphors appear in the accounts of 11 of the 20 participants with reference made 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.

Graham refers to his tendency to try to 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'. Although he has contemplated leaving the company, illustrating increasing feelings of insecurity, and drawing on powerful imagery, he muses:

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?

Like the career conveyer belt, roller coaster, and prison described by Peter, there is a sense of Graham experiencing career entrapment here. Unlike the 'lifers' who seem quite happy to remain where they are, Graham seems to want to escape but feels ill-equipped to do so.

The military metaphors do not stop there. For example, there are frequent references to (not) sending people (especially women) 'through the ranks'. According to Siobhan, this is not a feature exclusive to this particular organization. Referring to her previous organization, she explains:

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

Military operations are, by and large, male-dominated and senior officers (managers here) wield power selecting who to send through the ranks. David notes the tactics of the 'general' of his division:

The guy at the top. He is very, very power-orientated. 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.

As Janowitz (1968) has noted in his study of military careers, 'soldiers' vying for promotion must step in line and demonstrate their suitability by displaying obedience and conformity. Those jostling for position are thrown into battle with each other. The need to both fight and accept when it is time to give up the fight is highlighted by several participants, including Bethany, who decides it is easier to accept the adverse impact of motherhood on her career rather than attempt to challenge the *status quo*. She says:

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.

Further evidence of resistance comes from Ruth, who says she has had to fight unjust treatment 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.

Whether the resistance is effective is another matter. Ruth also ‘fights’ herself in her personal battle not to become a ‘company person’ or ‘lifer’ but suspects that she may have lost the battle. 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 flak. 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 straightforward matter of direction and control from above.

Encapsulated within the military metaphor then are notions of hierarchical order within the company, as well as fighting against, resisting, and surrendering to the power wielded by senior managers.

Career as school-like surveillance

School-like surveillance metaphors are used by 11 of the 20 participants. They describe themselves in terms of parent-child (akin to master-servant, general-soldier and guard-prisoner) type metaphors in line with the parent-child analogy which Ackers (1998) has used to explain the key features of paternalism. Getting on career-wise demands accepting one’s position as a child relative to the manager’s parental role. Amanda, for example, complains that managers:

have a lot of secrets and they won’t treat employees like grown ups.

Keith is irritated by the ways in which career progress can be secured:

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

Alison, now a second-line ‘parental’ figure, refers to her staff who have ‘grown up in the organization’. Her perspective is echoed in Ruth’s experiences who, despite 7 years service at the company, says:

I know I’m very much a baby [here].

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

Let’s capitalize on that by making you do 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.

William draws parallels between his work life at the organization and his experience of public school, portraying himself as the pupil and his managers as the schoolmasters.

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

Like the ‘lifers’ who come to interpret their ‘prison’ as some kind of familiar protective cocoon, others might also come to see the advantages of remaining a ‘baby’ or pupil as securing the ongoing care and protection of parent/teacher figures.

As if they were still at school, participants feel that they are constantly being examined and evaluated as either good or bad, and they strive hard to be judged as the former. Cathy tells how she was initially dependent on positive feedback from managers 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 in part signal 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. She engages in self-surveillance. Gillian complains about the rather more overt managerial surveillance under which she has found herself in the past:

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.

Like Cathy, Gillian now feels able and willing to monitor her own work. Since it is a precondition of promotion to a more 'grown up' or senior position, there are clear incentives for demonstrating consistently good behaviour.

Career as life in the Wild West

Wild West metaphors are employed by nine of the 20 participants. The imagery conjured up here is of good and bad guys (rather than children) in addition to outsiders, along with the activities of shooting yourself in the foot (by going against established, if tacit, career rules), watching your back, being 'sheep-dipped', and breaking people in.

'Good guys' are not necessarily just men but, viewed in conjunction with the masculine military metaphors, the absence of the feminine equivalent is perhaps a telling omission in the context of restricted career opportunities for some women within the organization, 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 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 organization, Alison is warned that others may seek revenge for what they see as an unfair and unwarranted promotion. This resonates with Joanne's worries about how others may react to what she sees as her undeserved, managerially-gifted promotion.

The fighting activity central to the military metaphor is echoed here. 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 organization, as well as hinting at the extent to which newcomers are quarantined and 'disinfected' of all that they may have picked up from elsewhere, David observes:

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, akin to a sort of medical quarantining, is thus understood as serving the purpose of removing threats to the organization's way from those who may carry beliefs and habits picked up from outside experiences. Just as becoming a 'lifer' seems a subconscious affair, Cathy worries that she may have been sheep-dipped without having been aware, alarmed at the thought that she may have unknowingly become 'the corporate animal'. The corporate animal in this context is one who is disinfected, malleable, eager to please and accepting of the rules of engagement. Such sheep-dipping 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.

Here, Linda refers to the work she has been engaged in teaching new managers the organizational way much like a cowboy might do to a wayward horse.

Nautical career metaphors

Fourteen of the 20 participants draw on nautical metaphors in their career accounts. Although there are some straightforward journey-type inclusions relating to the charting and mapping of career progress, most participants adopt a controlling, disciplining, and 'drowning' spin on this metaphor. The powerful imagery they draw on indicates feelings of fear, anxiety, and insecurity as being central to career conceptions. 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 is your oyster if you become an accountant.

Individuals thus set out on their career voyage. To stay on course, directions must be followed and rules obeyed. David for example 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 organization, he says:

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

The career voyage can be a treacherous one. Ruth talks of situations she has been 'thrown into'. Bethany, referring to a role she was placed in by her manager against her wishes, recalls:

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

Here, Bethany describes a sort of career test – the experience of being left alone without help to see whether she will succeed or fail, swim or sink. William has come to reinterpret such career experiences as in his best interests:

If I'm sort of thrown in at the deep end 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.

Elements of one's life must also be left to 'flounder' in order that career can be maintained. As Ruth recalls:

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

Here, Ruth suggests that she was unable to 'save' these relationships because she was so preoccupied and tied up with the pursuit of career and career progression.

Some, through their networks of contacts, have early warning systems in place to lessen the risk of making an ill-advised career choice and 'drowning' as a result. For example, Graham was advised to leave a particular department by a colleague who had heard rumours that its future was uncertain. He recalls the warning:

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.

In terms of their career development, resonating with Peter's description of the career conveyer belt, and despite great efforts, both Linda and Ruth here describe their sense of going nowhere.

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

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

The imagery here is of an individual being carefully 'reeled in' to the organization and his or her career within it.

Discussion

At the heart of much existing career theory lies an essentially unquestioned assumption that career is a valuable possession and its pursuit a worthwhile activity. Although the characteristics of individuals that may serve to hamper and obstruct their ability to

pursue career effectively have come under the microscope, the concept of career itself has escaped critical scrutiny and remains unproblematized. Except for a handful of notable exceptions (Fournier, 1998; Grey, 1994; Savage, 1998) the disciplinary functions of career and its effects – which the ‘metaphors-in-use’ of participants in this study draw attention to – have been left invisible in much career theorising. Issues of power have been largely neglected (Collin & Young, 2000). While there are some acknowledgements of the centrality of politics to the career process (e.g. Adamson *et al.*, 1998; Halford & Savage, 1995; Nicholson & Arnold, 1989; Pfeffer, 1989; Van Maanen, 1980) in the mainstream careers literature, there are few empirical studies that explore politics and the ways that discipline and control are achieved and experienced. This absence of political perspectives is compounded still further by the ‘new’ careers literature with claims that the ‘old’ bureaucratic, organizational and traditional career forms, with their implicit notions of hierarchy and vertical mobility, have been replaced by ‘new’ careers. ‘New’ careers come under a variety of headings. For example, the ‘protean’ career (Hall, 1996; Hall & Moss, 1998) hailed as the ‘career of the 21st century. . . a career that is driven by the person, not the organization’ (Hall, 1996, p. 8) promises autonomy to the individual and a career of which they, not their organizations, are the ‘driver’ (Mirvis & Hall, 1996: 16). ‘Boundaryless’ careers (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) emphasize an ‘action-based view’ of careers placing ‘the ownership primarily in the hands of individual actors rather than institutions’ (Peiperl & Arthur, 2000, p. 6). 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.

These images of free, autonomous and self-directing career actors have little to do with the experiences and subjective career interpretations of participants in this study. Perhaps one should not expect to find such ‘new’ careers in large blue-chip corporations. Yet, the new careers literature tells us that we should not expect to find ‘old’ careers here either, claiming that the traditional bureaucratic notions of career premised on the logic of advancement (Kanter, 1989) are outmoded. Nevertheless, such notions are still intact for participants in this study. Notions of vertical mobility are conveyed through spatial and horticultural metaphors, and hierarchy through military and school metaphors. Career success is still seen as climbing the ladder, growing taller, making a journey to a desired career destination, with as much speed as possible – a highly competitive race against time and against other career competitors. Of course, this may merely reflect the type of organization in this study and the legacy of its traditional career structures but, assuming that conceptions of career derive from an individual’s cumulative previous outside as well as current inside organizational experience, these career metaphors convey something of participants’ career conceptions more generally, and their career experiences beyond this particular organizational setting. The traditional career appears to be far more enduring than some commentators claim and indeed efforts within the company in this study to dismantle it seem to have been ineffective. Those who have announced the extinction of the traditional career should therefore think again. For example, Hall’s (1996, p. 1) declaration that ‘the career as we once knew it – as a series of upward moves, with steadily increasing income, power, status, and security – has died’ seems a little premature in light of evidence here. It is alive and well in this organization and, if the views of participants in this study echo those working in similar settings elsewhere, is likely to be so in those organizations too.

The dominant established career metaphors within the literature – spatial, journey, competition, and horticultural metaphors – are still very much in vogue for participants

in this study. In stark contrast to organizational claims that employees are 'free to succeed on their own terms' in a company 'completely free of limitations', through these metaphors participants describe how their ascents can be blocked, their journeys obstructed and their growth stunted. These readings of established metaphors together with the additional disciplinary career metaphors participants provide us with – prison, military, school-like surveillance, Wild West, and nautical – tell us so much more about the concept of career than both the well-rehearsed, traditional 'old' and contemporary 'new' career scripts. They present us with a rich and textured reading of career with a considerably thicker plot than the current mainstream careers literature provides, 'unlocking' disciplinary dimensions of career and career contexts not yet accessible in this literature.

Although Foucault himself did not apply his ideas to career and drew no parallels between career and his analysis of, for example, school examinations, military drills, medical quarantining (akin to 'sheep dipping' here) and imprisonment (Savage, 1998), the career 'metaphors-in-use' of participants in this study reveal just how startlingly apt such connections are. Foucauldian analyses urge us to consider how management control is secured via disciplinary power, the exercise of which Foucault (1977) saw to be achieved through the use of various panoptical surveillance techniques which promote self-surveillance and self-managed self-discipline. There is evidence of this here. For example, participants closely monitor their adherence to a series of tacit career rules and demonstrate their acceptance of these rules by not 'rocking the boat'. They must ensure that they maintain work levels and do not spend long 'on the bench' between projects. It is important not to be seen to make potentially costly mistakes by avoiding 'dropping the ball'. There are tacit notions of acceptable and unacceptable speeds of career progression and participants (e.g. Ruth and William) anxiously monitor their own progress against these schedules. Cathy monitors her own behaviour to ensure she is being 'good'. This is arguably evidence of self-management, but certainly not of the kind the 'new' careers literature describes. This is self-managed self-discipline and self-surveillance. This is though only part of the career story.

In his study of accountancy graduate trainees Grey (1994), who must be credited as the first to highlight empirically the disciplinary functions of career, draws on the ideas of Foucault and analyses the ways in which career can be seen to operate as a regulative device, highlighting the self-discipline which career creates. The surveillance of the 'disciplinary gaze', Grey argues, only in part explains the disciplinary effect of career. More powerful than this is the subjectifying self-disciplining which occurs through the pursuit of career. In other words, control is secured in large part through the constitution of subjectivity (Fournier, 1998; Grey, 1994; Savage, 1998). Employees come to see themselves as projects to be managed and develop what Savage (1998, p. 69) refers to as 'particular forms of self-hood'. In this study, becoming a 'lifer' represents such a transformation, as does becoming a company person who bleeds blue pinstripe blood, a good girl, a nice boy, a good guy, an insider (rather than an 'outsider') and a sheep-dipped corporate animal. With these new subjectivities developed, identities created, instances of disciplinary power which would ordinarily be considered as regulative may be re-interpreted as 'aids or adjuncts to career development' (Grey, 1994, p. 488). Thus, being thrown in at the deep end, for example, is understood to be developmental. The organizational prison is re-interpreted as a protective cocoon. The cosy security of the 'baby unit' is more than adequate compensation for the withheld promotion to the 'grown-up unit'.

However, participants do retain at least some critical awareness and insight. In her study of the careers of graduates within one organization, Fournier (1998) distinguished between two different groups: careerists who buy into the 'new' career discourse and militants who view the pursuit of career as controlling and disciplinary. There is no such distinction to be made here. All participants describe the disciplinary dimensions of career (frequently through metaphor) while simultaneously demonstrating at least a partial acceptance of the discourse of career. Thus, metaphor analysis here reveals complexity and contradiction as predicted (Morgan, 1986; Tietze *et al.*, 2003) within participants' career accounts. The metaphors participants employ show us how they make sense of and construct career and are themselves constructed and constrained by its pursuit, resonating with Mignot's (2000, p. 527) assessment of career as 'at once both enabling and constraining'.

There are a multitude of examples that illustrate the constraining and enabling aspects of career. For example, despite their wishes and efforts to get to their career destinations fast, participants often find themselves going nowhere – coasting, drifting, treading water, trapped on a career conveyer belt. They feel unsure about who controls their career, whether they are driving or being driven, steering or being steered, whether they are grown by others or manage this growth themselves, whether they are pursuing their own directions or have been given another's map. They are torn between their desire to become a 'grown up' and do 'grown up' work and the need to be seen as a good girl or nice boy. Although good girls and nice boys may not 'rock boats', they do attempt to protect themselves from some of career's more harmful effects in order to keep themselves and their careers afloat and avoid 'drowning'. They adorn body armour, struggle and fight in their efforts to resist the most unfair career practices they witness.

In pursuit of career, individuals optimistically climb ladders and set out on journeys to desired destinations and in so doing become entrapped. Career becomes something both to pursue and to escape. It hooks and imprisons leaving the pursuants wanting to bail out, parachute to safety, but often feeling unable to do so. Escape is made more difficult when individuals' sense of self – their identities – become inextricably linked to career. To achieve the status of a 'lifer', for example, and then to lose this is to lose oneself. Yet, as a 'lifer' career constrains as much as it enables. It comes at a high price. It demands sacrifices. It brings feelings of comfort and security yet fuels anxiety and insecurity. Only the continued pursuit of career and career success promises to remedy the insecurity, and it is this very pursuit which creates it.

Conclusions

Evidence presented in this paper suggests that metaphor analysis can fulfil its promise when applied to the study of career. It helps us to understand the ways in which individuals conceptualize their careers, generates new conceptual insights, offers a contextualized and critical reading of career which informs us of how careers both enable and constrain. Metaphor analysis here has facilitated the 'unlocking' of important but to date neglected dimensions to and key features of career adding to the small but growing body of evidence suggesting career may be better understood in terms of a politicized process in which discipline and control are key dimensions.

So why have these dimensions been so neglected to date? There are a number of possible explanations. First, the neglect may be in part a product of favoured positivist rather than interpretive methodologies (Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Collin & Watts, 1996)

with a focus on objective rather than subjective perspectives. Second, the marked absence of interdisciplinary work in the study of career (Collin & Young, 2000) and the resulting disciplinary segregation may offer a partial explanation. Scholars from different disciplines are inclined to ignore each other's work. To illustrate, Grey (1994, p. 481) insists that his Foucauldian analysis of career is not 'in any sense' a contribution to the careers literature. His distancing of his own work from this literature may be in part why this body of work in turn neglects his contribution. Third, the 'new' literature with its 'vocabulary of individual choice' which 'serves to depoliticize and individualize' (Fournier, 1998, p. 62) reproduces some of the problems which have dogged career theory. The emphasis on the individual is reinstated, context thereby continues to be neglected and issues of discipline and control remain marginalized.

To continue to neglect the disciplinary dimensions of career is to misrepresent the experiences of those having careers and to maintain a distorted understanding of the concept. Given the anxiety, insecurity, and feelings of entrapment which career can create and the stranglehold over lives and identities it can exert, there are clearly ethical concerns associated with the ongoing portrayal of career as a freedom-granting, self-fulfilling endeavour. The continued peddling of such notions, whether by researchers, employers and/or career guidance professionals, is likely to leave careerists ill-informed, unprepared and poorly equipped to deal with career and its effects. If we are to continue to refine our understanding of career, 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 'unlocking' of career can continue and new, more critical dialogue about the notion of career can be triggered. Metaphor analysis may be the key which fits the lock.

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