

Felt sense and figurative space: Clients' metaphors for their experiences of coaching

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Abstract

This study examines coaching clients' metaphors for their experiences of coaching. Semi-structured interviews with a specific focus on metaphor were carried out with six participants who had recently completed a cycle of coaching as a client. Interview material was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings suggest that eliciting metaphors is an effective, though problematic, means of generating experientially-rich research material. Findings highlight the relationship between metaphor and embodied experience; the sense of having grown as a result of the coaching; and the experience of time during the coaching encounter. Implications for coaching theory, practice and research are considered.

Keywords: coaching; metaphor; experience; embodiment; space, time

Introduction

A number of authors in the field of coaching, and in related fields such as psychotherapy, advocate working with metaphor as a means of eliciting aspects of experience which might be less readily accessed through more conventional routes of intervention (Harland, 2012; Bachkirova, 2011; Parkin, 2001; Lawley and Tompkins, 2000; Kozak, 1992; Siegelman, 1990). My own experience as a psychotherapist and coach supports this view. I find the use of metaphor highly valuable; I am often at my best when working in this essentially poetic way (Siegelman, 1990). My curiosity was further spurred by reading papers which suggested that the development of metaphors for the process and functions of coaching might serve to enrich our overall understanding of coaching as an activity (Armstrong, 2007; Steinmetz, 2012). The work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Geary (2011) and Kozak (1992) also strengthened my growing conviction that metaphor-making is a ubiquitous yet under-acknowledged feature of thought and language. It therefore seemed likely that an examination of clients' metaphors for their experiences of coaching might highlight aspects of the coaching encounter and process which had hitherto not been clearly visible to researchers, or, alternatively, provide a new optic through which to observe some familiar features.

I felt that a richer appreciation of the client experience through exploration of metaphor might enhance the capacity of trainee and qualified coaches to empathise with and understand the needs of their clients, and might assist trainers and supervisors in the task of facilitating the development of the coaches they work with. Prospective clients might have a fuller understanding of what coaching involves, and might thus be better enabled to make informed choices about participation.

A further reason for focusing on clients' experiences is that whilst coaching as a human activity has a lengthy and rich pre-history (Garvey, 2011; Wildflower, 2013), as an intellectual discipline it is relatively young, and, I would suggest, overly prone to theoretical speculation.

A greater prevalence in coaching's intellectual diet of research into clients' experiences might reduce our consumption of the kinds of tempting but insubstantial theories which for a long time stunted the growth of counselling and psychotherapy, coaching's older cousin (Miller *et. al.*, 1997).

The literature review in the next section begins with a necessarily brief account of intellectual approaches to metaphor which are particularly relevant to this study. It then explores the field of research into metaphor and coaching, before considering, briefly, the adjacent terrains of metaphor and mentoring and metaphor and therapy. There follows a methodology section providing an account of the methodological approach adopted in the study. The scene is thus set for an integrated presentation and analysis of some key findings; and I conclude by discussing the implications of the study for coaching theory, practice and research.

The Research Literature

This review examines what Boyle called the 'odd predilection for asserting a thing to be what it is not' (1954, p. 257). Despite an exponential increase in writing on the topic in the past sixty years or so (Black, 1993), metaphor's nature and significance remain keenly contested. As Cameron (1999) suggested, beyond the rather banal notion of metaphor as a means of understanding something by comparison with something else, there is little agreement as to how metaphor should be conceptualised. The subject is too extensive and complex to be explored in detail here (see Ortony, 1993 for an overview); however, no contemporary discussion of metaphor can ignore conceptual metaphor theory, the central premise of which is that:

metaphor is a major and indispensable part of our ordinary, conventional way of conceptualising the world, and that our everyday behaviour reflects our metaphorical understanding of experience (Lakoff, 1993, p. 204).

Lakoff's and Johnson's seminal 1980 text, *Metaphors We Live By*, furnishes a wealth of examples of the ways in which everyday thought involves the process of 'understanding one domain of experience in terms of another' (1980, p. 3). Examples include orientational metaphors such as 'more is up', 'less is down'; 'rational is up', 'emotional is down' (e.g. 'he couldn't rise above his emotions'); substance and entity metaphors such as 'theories are buildings', 'we need to construct a strong argument for that' and 'love is a journey'; container metaphors such as states are containers ('he's coming out of the coma'; 'he entered a state of euphoria'); and many more (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 16, 17, 28, 33, 42).

One of conceptual metaphor theory's key contributions has been the idea that, as Lakoff (1993, p. 204) suggests, 'the locus of metaphor is thought, not language.' Metaphor can no longer be regarded as merely a kind of rhetorical yeast, which, when used judiciously, can leaven the lump of intellectually nourishing but aesthetically unappetising prose. This point is made from a different angle by Geary, who offers the bold statement that 'the essential metaphor-making process of comparing the unknown with the known...is the way meaning was, is, and ever shall be made' (2011, p. 25). Geary quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1969, p. 130) suggestion that 'each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency because for the moment it symbolised the world to the first speaker and to the hearer'; the 'stroke of genius' consisted in drawing a comparison between a novel experience or idea and a familiar one, in other words, coining a metaphor. Language, in Emerson's felicitous phrase, is 'fossil poetry,' and the traces of countless moments of anonymous poetic insight lie just beneath the surface of everyday language.

To give a few examples, the word sarcasm derives from the Greek *sarkázein*, to strip off flesh (think of the phrase ‘biting sarcasm’); delicious and delight stem from the Latin *lacere*, to allure or entice, which stems in turn from *laqueus*, a noose or snare. Intention derives from the Latin *intendere*, to stretch out or towards; to derive originally meant to lead or draw off a stream of water (from the Latin *rivus*, stream). An epiphany is a manifestation from above (from the Greek *epi* + *phanos*), and in this respect the somewhat clichéd notion of a light-bulb moment is a modern take on an old idea. The word metaphor itself was originally a metaphor, created from the Greek *metapherein*, to carry across or beyond (the Arabic word for metaphor is *isti’ara*, or ‘loan’). ‘Etymology,’ as Geary (2011, p. 24) notes, ‘is said to be the final resting place for dead metaphors’.

The discussion above suggests that that metaphor is a vital means of making sense of experience. In this study, I am particularly concerned with the way that metaphor can convey what Gendlin describes as the ‘felt sense’ of pre-conceptual, embodied experience, and with how it can thereby create ‘a new felt meaning’ (Gendlin, 1997, p. 126). Kozak, in a study which integrates conceptual metaphor theory with Gendlin’s philosophical work on embodiment, suggests that ‘metaphors emerge from physical patterns of experience; that is, from our having a body that moves, orients, and breathes through time and space in a physical universe’ (Kozak, 1992, p. 143). He suggests that eliciting metaphors can serve to ‘make conscious the fundamental and embodied nature of imagination’ (Kozak, 1992, p 147). The focus in this study on clients’ metaphors for their experiences of coaching can be seen as an attempt to test these ideas in the crucible of research.

Metaphor and Coaching

In the field of coaching there is, it seems, no original research specifically focused on metaphor, and scant literature relating to the subject. I have only located two articles which pay sustained attention to the metaphors used by clients to describe their experiences. In each case, it was during the data analysis that the researchers noticed the prevalence and significance of metaphor in participants’ comments. Through examining metaphors in a study of self-doubt in coaching, Hindmarch (2008) found that clients highly valued a sense of affirmation from the coach and a ‘safe space’ for the coaching encounter. The notion of a safe space also features in a theoretical paper by Armstrong, for whom coaching is associated with ‘the ancient archetype of Hestia, representing hearth, centring and a sanctuary for self-focus’ (Armstrong, 2007, p. 30).

The most substantial engagement with clients’ metaphors is in a study by De Haan *et al.* (2010) of clients’ experiences of ‘critical moments’ during the coaching encounter. These moments might take a variety of forms, though the majority seem to involve an experience of epiphany. The preponderance of visual metaphors - including the ‘brief glimpse’; the experience of ‘becoming clear’; the gaining of ‘perspective’; ‘the moment I saw the path clear’ - furnishes evidence for the dominance of the ‘knowing is seeing’ metaphor identified by conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). However, the word realisation also recurs, and this perhaps suggests more of a felt sense of something becoming real. Similarly, the moment when something that had been ‘holding me back’ suddenly seemed such an easy thing to overcome; the metaphor of a ‘breakthrough in understanding’; and the metaphor of a ‘chiropractic click’ all suggest a keenly-felt bodily experience, as does the metaphor of liberation (De Haan *et al.*, 2010, pp. 610-13).

A trawl through the broader literature on clients’ experiences of coaching has yielded a modest catch of metaphors. In addition to the notion of a safe space, a small number of themes recur, in particular those relating to the coaching relationship, to insight and reflection, to personal change, and to support and challenge. Examples of metaphors for the relationship include ‘hidden glue’ and ‘foundation’ (O’Broin & Palmer, 2010, p. 131); ‘emotional and

motivational scaffolding' (Leahy & Magerman, 2009, p. 98); and 'a wall I can bounce things off' (Passmore, 2010, p. 54). Metaphors for visual and aural reflection, and for insight (which are themselves, of course, metaphors) include 'looking in the personal mirror,' having a 'sounding board,' gaining 'clarity,' and 'seeing with new eyes' (Brand & Coetzee, 2013, pp. 253, 251, 254; James-Ward & Potter, 2011, p. 127). The experience of enhanced authenticity is captured in metaphors of 'finding yourself' and 'being connected with your deeper self' (Leahy & Magerman, 2009, p. 96). The metaphor of 'self-discovery' also features in research by Cilliers (2011, p. 7), whilst Brand and Coetzee's (2013, p. 254) interviewee speaks of 'being in touch with your real self'. The notion of support punctuates the literature discussed in this section (as it does the broader coaching literature), though its figurative nature is seldom appreciated.

Metaphor and Mentoring

There are three research articles on metaphor and mentoring which are relevant to this study. Scanlon's phenomenological analysis of student mentors' metaphors for the mentoring role suggests that the work of the student mentor involves a plurality of relational stances, including, at a minimum, those of 'the navigator, the sage, the teacher and the friend' (Scanlon, 2009, p. 73). This sense of a plural identity also features in research by Ganser (1997), whose participants tend to use teaching metaphors to describe the mentoring process, and kinship metaphors for describing the mentoring relationship. The latter range from the more off-the-peg variety, such as parent, spouse, sibling or aunt, to the more bespoke, such as fairy-godmother, sponsor, babysitter and college roommate. Mentoring is frequently likened to an emergency service, for example a doctor, a car-breakdown service or a lifeboat. Many participants use metaphors for providing direction, echoing Scanlon's 'navigator' metaphor; and mentors' perceptions of the effects of mentoring are often conveyed in metaphors of growth or creation, be they zoological, horticultural or artistic.

A different tack is taken by Storrs *et al.* (2008), who draw on conceptual metaphor theory in analysing metaphors used by twenty-five female undergraduate mentees and their mentors. The authors have a feminist outlook, and are primarily concerned with using Discourse Analysis to examine the ways in which unacknowledged metaphors might serve to construct and reproduce gendered social identities. They identify two contrasting conceptual metaphors for the mentoring relationship: the transmission model, 'characterised by some degree of hierarchy and paternalism' (Storrs *et al.* 2008, p. 178), and the interdependent model, which emphasises equality and collaboration. Respective examples of these are a gardening metaphor, whereby the mentor-gardener tends the mentee-plant, and a more collaborative metaphor of paddling together in a double kayak.

Metaphor and Therapy

The only specific research relating to clients' metaphors for their experiences of therapy is in a paper by Rabu *et al.* (2013), which analyses data from recordings of twelve therapy dyads and from post-therapy interviews in which therapists and clients reflected on the ending of the therapy and the gains the clients had made. It is included here on account of the prevalence of metaphors which suggest a sense of healing or relief, whether this consists in having put down a heavy burden, or having grown in strength, or having come out of prison, or no longer being on the verge of drowning (Rabu *et al.*, 2013). Herein, perhaps, might lie a difference between the experiences of therapy and coaching.

Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an idiographic approach to research, which seeks to elicit, examine and convey to a wider audience the quiddity of personal experience (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Although it is partly concerned with identifying commonalities

in the experiences of research participants, IPA is primarily characterised by forensic engagement with individual experience, which is viewed as valid and valuable in its own right, rather than as part of a larger aggregation. Each person's experience is irreducibly particular; and the IPA researcher resonates with Bugental's notion of "a psychology of non-interchangeable units" (1963, p. 564).

Whilst IPA follows the originator of phenomenology, Husserl, in championing the detailed examination of lived experience, it also accepts the hermeneutist challenge from those of Husserl's successors, in particular Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, who reject the Husserlian notion of a pure phenomenology (Moran, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 2009). However much the phenomenological practices of bracketing, description and horizontalisation might move us closer to experience as it emerges into awareness (Spinelli, 2005), interpretation can never be eliminated entirely. The hermeneutist position is captured in Gadamer's (1989, p. 87) statements that interpretation is not "an isolated activity of human beings but a basic structure of our experience of life," and that "we are always taking something *as* something." Interpretation, in other words, is woven into the very fabric of our existence in the world (Schwandt, 2000).

As a consequence of this hermeneutist stance, and by contrast with a strictly phenomenological approach (Willig, 2013), IPA requires researchers to *engage, rather than bracket*, their biases. Gadamer's (1989, p. 295) notion of "fundamental enabling prejudices" is relevant here, as is Nietzsche's (1989) insistence that intellectual activity is necessarily partial, and that our knowledge of any phenomenon develops through the elaboration of a plurality of perspectives. The nature of the knowledge generated by an IPA study is neatly captured by Gadamer's (1989, p. 267) metaphor of a "fusion of horizons" between the researcher and the material; and my background as a therapist, trainer, teacher and coach has clearly influenced my choice of research topic, the specific focus on the felt sense, and at least some of the findings discussed below.

Rationale.

IPA was chosen because of its strong affinity with the overall purpose of this study. As Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 187) suggest, "IPA is concerned with examining how a participant makes sense of, or seeks meaning in, their experience." This study is concerned with exploring how clients use metaphor to make sense of, and thereby find meaning in, their experiences of coaching. Moreover, the case for using IPA to research metaphor has been made by IPA's originator, Jonathan Smith, who, with a colleague, has used IPA to examine participants' metaphors for their experiences of addiction (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). The authors suggest that metaphor is particularly well-suited to IPA analysis, as it is a strongly idiographic form of symbolisation, yet its essentially ambiguous and indeterminate character lends it a high degree of hermeneutic potential.

A further reason for choosing IPA is its congruence with my personal values and intellectual convictions. Whilst in my work as a therapist, trainer, teacher and coach I draw on a range of theoretical perspectives, my spiritual home lies in the existential-phenomenological tradition from which IPA issues. My therapeutic and coaching practices both involve a dialectical dance of phenomenological immersion in, and hermeneutic grappling with, my clients' experiential worlds; and my ethical touchstone, like an IPA researcher's, is fidelity to the lived experience of the other (Marcel, 1949).

Sampling, Data-Gathering, Data-Analysis.

Given its idiographic thrust, the aim of IPA research is not primarily to produce findings which are generalisable to a broader population, but to generate detailed, nuanced accounts of the lived experience of individuals. Therefore participants should represent "a perspective,

rather than a population” (Smith *et al.* 2009, p. 49), and their number should be small enough to enable an in-depth analysis. The sample should be reasonably homogeneous, partly for reasons of representativeness, and partly because background homogeneity throws individual differences into sharper relief.

In line with the above criteria, I adopted a purposive approach to sampling and opted for a sample size of six participants. Potential participants were recruited via my network of organisational and coaching contacts. The key criterion for suitability was that participants would have recently completed a cycle of coaching, and would thus be in a position to reflect on all aspects of the experience. I chose at not to be prescriptive about the precise nature of the coaching, provided that it had been with a qualified coach. Some participants’ coaching had been work-focused; some more life-focused; some a mixture of the two.

I used a semi-structured interview schedule, which was informed by my reading of the literature discussed above. I would suggest that a semi-structured interview, which combines a free-flowing, exploratory approach with a small number of questions informed by an element of a priori theorising, manifests the creative tension between the phenomenological and hermeneutic aspects of IPA. Each participant was interviewed once, and invited to furnish metaphors for various aspects of their experiences of coaching, including the coaching relationship, the process and outcomes of change, and the place of coaching in their broader lifeworlds. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Willig (2013, p. 95) criticises phenomenological research methods such as interviews for potentially excluding ‘those who may not be able to articulate [their experiences] in the sophisticated manner required by the method.’ The critique perhaps holds particular relevance for research specifically focused on metaphor, as two of the six participants found it very difficult to provide more than a handful of metaphors for their experiences of coaching. In attempting to offer prompts, I frequently found myself resorting to suggesting examples; and on listening to the recordings of the interviews, I concluded that the extent of prompting and suggestion from me rendered the material from these two participants too unreliable to be included.

This miscarriage has some methodological implications for adopting a specific research focus on metaphor. However, the reduction in the sample size from six to four does not detract from the sample, which, as suggested above, represents ‘a perspective, rather than a population’ (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 49). Indeed, given the richness of the yield from the other four participants, the reduction in number was felicitous, as it enabled a more detailed and thorough analysis of the material.

The process of data analysis closely followed IPA protocol (see Smith *et al.*, 2009). I began with a close, line-by-line reading and re-reading of one interview transcript, making comments in the left-hand margin as I read. This is the most avowedly phenomenological part of the data analysis in IPA, and here I drew on the techniques mentioned above of description, horizontalisation (i.e. assuming that all aspects of the material have equal significance) and bracketing of preconceptions (Spinelli, 2005). The aim was to avoid, to the extent that this is possible, imposing my ideas on the material at this stage.

The next step involved examining my comments and noting emergent themes in the right-hand margin, whilst still returning to the transcript to confirm the validity of my choices. It was here that a more obviously interpretative process began, and this continued as I grouped the emergent themes into more encompassing ones and arranged them in an A3-sized table. I then repeated the process with the other transcripts, until I had a table for each participant. The final

step involved analysing the tables in order to identify themes which could encompass the experiences of the four participants, named Vicky, Eddie, Marion and Elaine.

In analysing the transcripts, I was frequently reminded of the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1989), and of how the interpretation of one or more texts involves an iterative process of movement between part and whole, concrete and abstract, particular and general. From the accumulation of individual instances, patterns form; examining the patterns casts the individual instances in a different relief, highlighting previously-unnoticed features; and thus the circle turns. It is through this process that themes emerge which, as Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 92) put it, 'contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual,' and thus hold the dialectical tension between the one and the many.

Findings and Analysis

The three themes which emerged from the process outlined above are Metaphor and the Felt Sense; Growth; and The Coaching Space.

Metaphor and the Felt Sense. A noteworthy feature of all of the participants' accounts of their experiences of coaching is the way in which they furnish metaphors from the spatio-temporal world of the body and the natural and physical environment in order to convey the more abstract qualities of subjective experience. This might seem a banal observation: how else, one might ask, can we convey the abstract, other than by reference to the concrete? However, it is interesting insofar as it serves to support the thesis that metaphor emerges from, and vividly expresses, the felt sense of embodied experience.

So, for example, Vicky's account of her need for coaching draws upon fluidic metaphors, which evince a strong sense of accumulated pressure followed by release. She speaks of 'just letting it all pour out...and then you feel almost like fully cleansed,' and explains that

because I'm quite a closed person, it's almost like you've got blockages...but once you do start talking you can't stop, it's like a waterfall effect where you can just bubble up and go on and on. But then you feel better after that.

There is a clear felt sense of catharsis here; and it is interesting to note that the origin of the word 'catharsis' is the Greek *kathairein*, to purge or cleanse, an instance, it seems, of just the kind of poetic inspiration described by Emerson and Geary.

Elsewhere, Vicky recounts an unhelpful experience with a different coach, whom she found 'quite invasive and quite intrusive in terms of my own personal feelings and emotions,' and describes how in response 'I just kind of clammed up and went into my own shell.' This conveys the felt sense of the almost autonomic withdrawal and disengagement we experience in response to perceived interpersonal vulnerability. Vicky also describes feeling 'thrown into the deep end' and 'riding a bike without stabilisers for the first time' without sufficient 'support,' employing gravity-based metaphors which are echoed in Elaine's description of a coach who "just wasn't as embedded in the ground and the more wobbly she got the more wobbly I got and the less firm she was in the ground the less firm I was in the ground". The anxiety is palpable here; and we glean, as we do with Vicky, a felt sense of the deep existential dread which underlies the clichéd metaphor of support.

Eddie, whose experience of coaching was perhaps the most therapeutic, and the most relationally profound, of those discussed here, says of his coach that "she really [exhales strongly] got into me". I would suggest that Eddie's exhalation was not a consciously intentional act, but an expression of his felt sense of the power of the coach's presence, a felt

sense which the accompanying metaphor so arrestingly conveys. Eddie also likens the coaching to ‘a very nice big hug,’ conveying, it seems, the felt sense of love and containment he experienced. The coaching was also very challenging, and Eddie likens the process as a whole to one of pruning a fruit bush so as to enable it to bear more fruit. The growth aspect is discussed below; here, I suggest that the pruning metaphor conveys Eddie’s felt sense of discomfiture at being denuded of familiar, protective layers of personality.

Finally on the theme of the felt sense, Marion, who, partly as a result of the coaching, experienced something akin to a personal metanoia, remarks that “literally my world’s turned upside down”. What are we to make of an apparently absurd statement such as this, coming as it does from someone who during the interview demonstrates a keen appreciation of linguistic nuance? I would suggest that Marion uses the word ‘literally’ because, in its absence, the somewhat clichéd metaphor does not sufficiently convey the powerful felt sense of her experience. In other words, ‘literally’ is not being used literally here, but as an intensifying adverb; it is as if Marion is saying, “it *really feels* as if my world’s turned upside-down”.

Growth. We have already seen how Eddie’s account of the effects of coaching involves the metaphor of pruning so as to enable healthy growth. Previous experiences of coaching, whilst helpful in their way, had amounted to no more than ‘light pruning,’ and as a result had not enabled him to address what he now recognised as a deeper malaise in his way of being. It became clear to Eddie that he needed a fundamental look at the soil, a major prune, more fertilizer, the whole lot. This was clearly an uncomfortable process; Eddie does not describe it directly, but alludes to it in the following exchange:

E: I did that to my blackcurrant bush two years ago, gave it a complete going over and it produced nothing last year. This year it's going to be heaving, it's so much better. [] To get good yields off your plants in terms of flowers and in terms of crops, you have to do things to them that really make them happy and well.

D: And in the short run that might make them a bit unhappy, like your blackcurrant bush.

E: Yeah, exactly.

Like Eddie’s, Marion’s experience of growth was preceded by one of shrinkage, which Marion captures in a metaphor of shedding. This refers in part to losing weight, and to jettisoning the ballast of some material possessions and simplifying her way of living. It also conveys a sense of:

... shedding the past, shedding a lot of critical voices from the past and my own beliefs, past beliefs that are not really working any more. And really trying to see what I do like doing putting me forwards...a whole new me will come out of this soon.

Marion conveys the notion of ‘a whole new me’ by using a metaphor of ‘the metamorphosis of moving from one state to another state’, and as she develops this theme, her ambivalence towards the process of change is captured in an image of negative metamorphosis:

I feel sometimes you got this kind of chrysalis, this skin around you and it breaks free and you come out as something else. I’m thinking of the *Alien* movie...there’s a freedom but also maybe there’s a fear aspect as well.

The reference is to Riddley Scott’s *Alien* movie (1979), in which alien creatures burst forth from the stomachs of human hosts who are destroyed in the process. *Alien* can be seen as, among other things, an allegory for the basic existential anxiety which attends upon the process

of change, a process which, however much it is desired, remains essentially unpredictable. For Marion, who describes herself as a highly creative person, it also symbolises the way in which ‘the creative process takes on its own journey and its own creation, it becomes its own thing.’

For Elaine, who, like Marion, uses a metaphor of shedding, the process of growth is wholly positive:

... kind of shaking off another skin of stuff that doesn't mean anything and growing a skin which is a meaningful skin. And each time we're in a coaching session there is a new version of Elaine that emerges as a result of that.

This sense of emergence and growth is also present in the metaphor of a Russian doll, “but it's a whole person Russian doll...the process of coaching generates another layer that's grown on to that that's kind of you stepped one sense further in to who you really are”.

Vicky's sense of growth is captured in the metaphor of growing up (a notion which is itself a metaphor). This is linked with a central element of the coaching, which involved “how I deal with my emotions in certain situations”. Vicky recounts her childlike state of anxiety at the start of the coaching, and how she experienced “going through adolescence”:

... and then at the end you're a full-grown adult with your own responsibilities that you almost know how to deal with your own feelings...and so for me it was definitely around growing up and being more emotionally secure.

Despite their differences, these experiences of growth are all associated with a sense of greater authenticity. Elaine has ‘stepped one sense further into who you really are’; Vicky refers to ‘finding who you are again.’ Marion's new identity is still fledgling, but “feels more weighted and it feels more kind of like real for me...and it fits with the kind of person I am”. Eddie makes no direct allusion to realness or authenticity, but the coaching has clearly inculcated a more authentic way of being, insofar as it has led him to stop trying to meet his needs vicariously by fighting others' battles, and to take greater care of himself. It seems worth recalling at this point that an increased sense of authenticity is a theme in the literature discussed earlier. Given this linkage between growth and authenticity, it is perhaps also worth noting that the word ‘be’ ultimately derives from the Sanskrit *bhu*, meaning to grow or make grow (Kozak, 1992). Perhaps in this ancient word we hear an echo of the felt sense of becoming?

The Coaching Space. This theme relates to the metaphors which three of the participants use to describe the figurative space within which the coaching takes place. I say ‘figurative’ because whilst the coaching encounter inevitably occupies a certain physical space, the metaphors discussed in this section are concerned, not with physical space but with a certain psychological experience of the coaching encounter.

The metaphor of the coaching space is central to Elaine's account of her experience of a coaching session. She begins our interview by describing coaching as:

a space that you wander around looking for little nuggets of gold where you get little explosions of insight...and you position things around to try to come to some kind of connectivity and insight...and then wandering back round again you're making the connections there's something over there, something over there, something over there.

Although later in our interview Elaine refers to occasions when she moves physically around the coaching room, in the quote above she is referring not to physical movement, but to

movement in the figurative psychological space in which the coaching encounter places her. She speaks of having a ‘complete sense of curiosity in that space,’ and emphasizes the ‘creative, exploratory’ attitude that coaching fosters, a point which is echoed by Marion, for whom the coaching space is:

a bit like that shape like a yurt shape or something. And it's kind of in that vacuum within the space of that tent that support is created. That's where the space is to feel safe, to feel I can open up and share a lot of ideas, it's a creative space.

Finally, Vicky describes how in the coaching space she finds herself ‘taking risks within that controlled environment to explore different ways of approaching things to see what works best.’ Developing this theme, Vicky offers the metaphor of being

... a soldier going to Laser Quest if you like before going to war, and kind of practising your different techniques without actually hurting anyone before you go out into the big wide world.

Once again, there is a sense of play and experimentation, although Vicky’s reference to “the big wide world” suggests that her experimentation and playfulness are tinged, characteristically, with a degree of youthful anxiety. Taken together, these spatial metaphors seem to capture the peculiar blend of enclosure and freedom which the participants experience during a coaching session; and the figurative nature of this enclosure is made explicitly clear in the following vignette from Marion:

We did an exercise in a café, I was kind of imagining in a Gestalt way that I was in a chair and I was sort of, you know, focusing on something about getting angry... I couldn't believe that even though we were in a café and it was private but it was sort of I felt we're in this cocoon or the tent where I could do that.

And so it is unambiguously clear that the references to the coaching space are metaphorical rather than literal. The coaching encounter takes place in this imaginative space, a space which is experienced as separate from the everyday world, even when, as in Marion’s example, the corresponding physical space is entirely contiguous with this world.

One way to make sense of this figurative space is by reference to Winnicott’s account of play. For Winnicott, play involves “neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality” (1980, p. 113). For the infant or child, play takes place in a “potential space between subject and object” (p. 120), part me and part not-me, in which the writ of the reality principle does not run. In order to be able to enter, and remain in, this vital space, the infant or child needs to feel safe; and this sense of safety is largely dependent upon the unobtrusive yet facilitative presence of the care-giver. For Winnicott, this experience of a safe space of make-believe is the template for all cultural experience, which “begins with creative living first manifested in play” (Winnicott, 1980, p. 118). The accounts above evince just such a sense of a space somewhere between the self and the world, in which, in the containing presence of a coach, the participants can play, take risks, and be creative and curious, without the usual real-world consequences.

Another way of making sense of this figurative coaching space is by reference to the distinction made in the Classical world between two forms of time, *Chronos* and *Kairos*. The former is the time of the clock, a succession of moments in what Benjamin (1992) termed homogeneous, empty time. As directional metaphors such as ‘life is a journey’ suggest, it is the common-sense view of time (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It is, however, deeply problematic. Like sections of a line, moments can be divided into smaller and smaller ones until, just as a

mathematical point has no extension in space, a moment has no extension in the dimension of time. As Stern suggests, from the perspective of *Chronos*, “effectively there is no present” (2004, p. 5).

By contrast, *Kairos* is similar to what Benjamin, drawing on ideas from Jewish mysticism, described as *Jetztzeit*, or “now-time” (1992, p. 253). As Stern explains, *Kairos* is:

the coming into being of a new state of things, and it happens in a moment of awareness. It has its own boundaries, and it escapes or transcends the passage of linear time...It is a subjective parenthesis set off from *Chronos*. (2004, p. 7)

In other words, the notion of *Kairos* seems to convey a felt sense of time as qualitative rather than quantitative, or, as Tepper (2012) puts it, intensive rather than extensive. As far as I am aware, this distinction between *Chronos* and *Kairos* has not been acknowledged by analysts of metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) confine their analysis of metaphors for time either to the directional variety or to metaphors which see time as a substance, as in, for example, the statement, ‘we don’t have enough time’. In either instance, the metaphor refers to the quantitative time of the clock. The same applies to the research of Boroditsky, a psychologist who furnishes some experimental evidence for the use of spatial metaphors to convey the experience of time, and who suggests that ‘time is a phenomenon in which we experience continuous, unidirectional change’ (Boroditsky, 2000, p. 4; see also Núñez and Cooperrider, 2013).

All of the participants in this study used directional spatial metaphors for time as a sequence of events, for instance when describing the overall coaching process as a journey, and the role of coaching as one of providing a clearer sense of orientation. This metaphorical conception of time is so deeply embedded in language and culture as to pass generally unnoticed, as witness, for example, the unreflective use of the metaphor of leadership, and the metaphor of mentor-as-navigator. Or consider the verb ‘to err’, which derives from the Latin *errare*, to stray, and how its literal and figurative meanings are entwined in the opening stanza of the *Divine Comedy* (Dante, 2003, p. 67):

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
for I had wandered off from the straight path

Even the words ‘then’ and ‘when’ derive from a proto-Germanic word meaning ‘from that place’ (Geary, 2011). I would argue, however, that all of these metaphors, old and new alike, refer to *Chronos*, to the sense of time as a succession of events.

By contrast, Stern’s account of *Kairos* features spatial metaphors of boundaries and parentheses which recall just the sense of enclosure we see in the accounts of the coaching space; it also conveys a similar sense of possibility and emergence. The sense of directionality is notably absent. I therefore want to suggest that what the metaphor of the coaching space conveys is a particular experience not of space but of *time*, *Kairos*, a moment in which time’s flow is interrupted.

Discussion and Conclusion

This is a small-scale study, and any claims to generalisability should be commensurately tentative. The question of generalisability in interpretative research is notoriously slippery, and I can do no more here than echo Williams’ suggestion that “the interpretivist attitude to

generalisation is rather like that of the Victorian middle classes towards sex. They do it, they know it goes on, but they rarely admit to either” (2000, p. 210).

This caveat notwithstanding, the findings appear to support the notion that metaphor can carry a powerful experiential charge, and that examining metaphor can generate valuable knowledge (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010; Kochis & Gillespie, 2006; Bonner & Greenwood, 2005; Levitt et al., 2000). The accounts of the felt sense, the experience of growth, and the experience of the coaching space reveal aspects of the participants’ experiences of coaching which probably would not have been made visible by a more conventional interview procedure.

At the same time, adopting a specific focus on metaphor at the data-gathering stage is clearly problematic. Not all of the participants were able to come up with metaphors of their own; and whilst for the reasons already stated this doesn’t reduce the validity of the findings, it does raise questions about the inclusivity of this kind of research. If, as seems to be the case, the ability to operate on the level of metaphor varies significantly from person to person (Geary, 2011), how might researchers develop interview procedures and techniques for participants to whom working with metaphor does not come easily? One option might be to use the kinds of Clean Language techniques described by Harland (2012) and Lawley and Tompkins (2000); another might be to adopt the kinds of creative interviewing techniques outlined by Bagnoli (2009).

The finding which perhaps offers the greatest scope for further investigation is that of the coaching space, which, as suggested above, has to do with a certain experience of time. We might consider what is the felt sense of this vital experience of *Kairos*, and how can coaches best create the right conditions for the creative exploration of experience. The associated notions of safety, support and enclosure would also merit further attention. My impression is that because the metaphorical nature of these notions tends to go unrecognised, something of real significance for our understanding of the lived experience of coaching has been, as it were, hidden in plain sight. The same is true of many of the metaphors discussed in this study. Consider, for example, the metaphors of openness and closedness underlying Vicky’s clamming up or Eddie’s coach getting into him. What experiential riches might such metaphors yield if carefully excavated?

The notion of the coaching space as a space of experimentation and play also has a clear affinity with the metaphor of the therapeutic frame, which, like the frame of a painting “marks off the different kind of reality that is within it from that which is outside it” (Milner, 1952, p. 181; see also Gray, 1994). A comparative study of the metaphors used by coaching and therapy clients to convey their experiences of these figurative spaces might shed new light on the question of the differences and similarities between coaching and therapy, and the figurative boundaries, or bridges, between them (Bachkirova and Cox, 2005; Vaughan Smith, 2007; Spinelli, 2008).

In relation to coaching theory and practice, the findings support the claim that a facilitated dialogue about metaphors offers a powerful means of connecting with experience at a more immediate level. Examining metaphors enabled moments of significant realisation for all participants. At one point, Marion broke off in mid-flow to say, “this is really interesting”; and at the end of the hour-long conversation she said:

It’s almost like you go into a dream-world because in your dreams you have metaphors a lot...you’re allowed to have an adventure with metaphors and then you know, coming back into everyday life you bring it back.

What holds for the research interview can also apply to the coaching encounter; and coaches might therefore benefit from paying careful attention to clients' metaphors, and from learning to facilitate exploration of this realm (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). Trainers and supervisors might also devote more specific attention to helping trainees to develop the necessary skills and awareness.

The notion of the coaching space can also serve as a useful heuristic for coaches. One vital feature of this space is its non-instrumental nature; like Winnicott's (1980) potential space, it is fundamentally a space of exploration and play rather than one of goal-directed endeavour. (Unlike Winnicott's concept of potential space, the notion of the coaching space doesn't require us to subscribe to a reductive Freudian metapsychology which sees adult creativity as essentially derivative of infantile play, and which therefore models the coaching encounter, like the therapeutic one, on the mother-child dyad.) In this respect, the heuristic notion of the coaching space can offer a helpful counterweight to the overly-instrumentalist, *Chronos*-based mindset which is so prevalent in the coaching literature, and which is colonising ever more areas of the human lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). There is, of course, a role in coaching for the instrumentalist pursuit of specific goals, and the development of detailed, concrete plans for their realisation. However, as the accounts of the coaching space make very clear, this is only one aspect of coaching; and coaches might therefore be encouraged to bring not only a tool-kit (Zeus & Skiffington, 2002) but also a toy-box to their encounters with clients.

What does seem clear from the participants' accounts of what worked and what didn't is that this form of creative engagement requires just the kind of grounded, containing and non-intrusive presence on the part of the coach which Winnicott (1980) associated with the good-enough caregiver. Trainers and supervisors might therefore use the notion of the coaching space as a heuristic guide in their task of developing coaches' ability to provide the right kind of presence for their clients. They might also develop a heuristic notion of a figurative training/supervision space, and consider what conditions might best enable trainees and supervisees to flourish therein.

This article has made what I hope is a persuasive case for the value of research focused on metaphor. It has provided glimpses of the semantic riches which lie barely concealed beneath the surface of everyday language, and pointed to the role of figurative language in conveying the embodied sense of personal experience. In the notion of the coaching space, it has yielded a new means of conceptualising important aspects of the coaching encounter; it has also, perhaps, furthered our understanding of the metaphors by which we live.

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Filmography

Alien (1979) Directed by Ridley Scott. 111 minutes. Twentieth Century Fox. DVD

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