

Gill Turner

University of Oxford, UK

Context

Understanding life as a post-PhD researcher (researcher) has been researched through a number of perspectives, including case study (e.g. Sukhnandan, 1997), narrative (e.g. McAlpine, 2010) and phenomenographic (e.g. Akerlind, 2008) methodologies. Such studies document researchers as experiencing inferior status, prospects and employment conditions, marginalisation, and financial insecurity (Allen-Collinson, 2004); ambiguous identity and job insecurity (Lee et al 2006). They are noted as being invisible, excluded, isolated, exploited and powerless in relation to their own personal and professional development (Shelton, 2001) and in terms of hours worked, responsibilities, roles, and recognition (Wahlberg et al, 2004). Yet, amid frequent relocations and challenges to managing work and life, researchers are noted as having an intellectual passion and personal commitment for their work (McAlpine, 2010), and perceive their role as fulfilling academic requirements, establishing oneself in the field, developing oneself personally, and enabling broader change (Akerlind, 2008).

In such descriptions, metaphors have been used occasionally by the authors to depict the substance of researcher lives, for instance, ‘underground working’ (Wahlberg et al, 2004); ‘working at the coal-face’ (Shelton et al, 2001); ‘nomads’ (Allen-Collinson, 2004); ‘self-sacrifice’ (McAlpine, 2010). However, a structured analysis of the metaphors researchers themselves use has not been published yet; the closest such article is by Pitcher and Akerlind (2009) which revealed metaphors used by researchers to describe their conceptions of research. Consequently, this paper documents a metaphor analysis of researcher experiences to ascertain whether any more nuanced perceptions persist.

Conceptual framework:

This paper takes a novel approach by considering the metaphors researchers used in describing their post-PhD experiences. Metaphors are the ‘application of name or descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is imaginatively but not literally applicable (e.g. a glaring error; food for thought; leave no stone unturned; Oxford Concise Dictionary)’, or more simply, ‘comparing two things via their similarities and ignoring their differences’ (Miles et al, 2013). Considered to be unconsciously generated, metaphors can be assumed to reflect the person’s underlying feelings and understanding, which they may be unable or unwilling to express consciously (Pitcher and Akerlind, 2009). Metaphor analysis (Schmidt, 2005) is a systematic way of gaining understanding of a person’s often unconscious motives and reasons for doing something or their conception of the process involved in doing it.

Research question

What does a metaphor analysis of self-reported experience reveal about researchers' views of their role?

Methodology

Participants: Five social science researchers from two UK-research intensive universities who were part of a larger, five year longitudinal project. Four were female, one was male; two spoke English as an additional language.

Data collection and analysis: Individuals completed a biographic questionnaire and a number of weekly activity logs, before undertaking a semi-structured interview which explored their career trajectory and some of the reported activities and events to date, and their aspirations for the future. This analysis covers participants' first year data.

Method: The method outlined in Pitcher and Akerlind (2009) was followed. Logs and interviews for each participant were read and re-read, and the metaphors relating to participants' experiences as post-PhD researchers were highlighted. A dictionary was referred to for definitions of words to infer possible meanings and determine whether a word had been used literally or metaphorically. Where highlighted metaphors appeared to be related these were clustered together into a metaphorical concept and given a name. Each participant's data were then re-reviewed to determine which metaphorical concept seemed to be the dominant i.e. represented most frequently in their data and which appeared to be minor (less frequently represented).

Results

Preliminary analysis found two dominant metaphorical concepts underlying participants' experiences. Researcher life was identified in three participants' data as '*Competitive*' – an experience involving contesting something purposefully, trying to keep up with or stay ahead of other people (e.g. 'competing interests, research clubs, raising my game, people on the other side, play around with data, goals, hop from one issue to another'); and in two participants' data as '*3-Dimensional*' – an experience connected to something concrete (e.g. 'area of expertise, forum, background paper, hit the spot, satisfying place') yet expanding or constrained physically and relationally (e.g. 'wider sphere, tight timescale, get into shape, lofty role, separate centre, provided an outline, steep learning curve'). Minor concepts noted researcher life as '*Oppressive*' – a harsh, burdensome experience (e.g. 'pressures to publish puts extra strain, heavy dimensions, struggle, effort, abuse, work/life balance issues, push back on colleagues'); '*Embodied*' – a resilient experience involving core principles, attentiveness, affect and interpersonal skills (e.g. 'backbone of what an academic does, keep an ear close to the ground, connections help towards binocular and all-round vision, felt thin-skinned, nerve-wracking, putting people in touch, keeping people at arm's length'); '*Constructive*' – a practical experience of tangibly building up and adding to research knowledge (e.g. 'applying frameworks, using tools, shaping research, build something, nail it down, workshops'); and '*Systematic*' – an integrated, interpersonal experience (e.g. 'connected with them, collect input from them, feed my views in, parallel to his book series, welcomed by people on lower levels').

Conclusion

Metaphor analysis of these researchers' experiences exposed two hitherto unreported perspectives of researcher lives and provides a more nuanced view of their experience. Each dominant concept appears to reflect aspects of the wider context, suggesting their narratives are unconsciously framed by the situations in which they work. Researcher life as 'Competitive' echoes the reality of the demands on aspiring academics to strive and exceed others in order to obtain a long-term academic position. Researcher life as '3-Dimensional' echoes the fluid nature of research whereby researchers' experiences are extended, adapted and changed in response to the developments in the focus, place, and purpose of their investigations. These two concepts reveal something more about how the researchers within each concept primarily understand their post-PhD life at the particular stage at which they were interviewed. It would be interesting to examine whether the metaphors held by the same person change when viewed at different stages of their career.

References

- Akerlind, G. (2008). An academic perspective on research and being a researcher: an integration of the literature. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(1): 17-31.
- Allen Collinson, J. A. (2004). Occupational identity on the edge: Social science contract researchers in higher education. *Sociology*, 38 (2): 313-329.
- Lee, T., Fuller, A., Bishop, D., Felstead, A., Jewson, N., Kakavelakis, K. and Unwin, L. (2006). Reconfiguring contract research? Career, work and learning in a changing employment landscape. *Paper presented at SRHE conference, Brighton 12-14 December*.
- McAlpine, L. (2010). Fixed-term researchers in the social sciences: passionate investment, yet marginalising experiences. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 15(3): 229-240.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., and Saldana, J. (2013). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook (Third Edition)*. London: SAGE.
- Schmitt, R. (2005). Systematic metaphor analysis as a method of qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 10 (2): 358-394.
- Shelton, N., Laoire, C. N., Fielding, S, Harvey, D.C., Pelling, M., Duke-Williams, O. (2001). Working at the coal-face: contract staff, academic initiation and the RAE. *Area*, 33(4): 434-439.
- Sukhnanan, L. (1997). Indispensable but under-valued: the exploitation of contract research staff. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 2(3): 333-339.

Pitcher, R. and Akerlind, G.S. (2009). Post-doctoral researchers' conceptions of Research: A metaphor analysis. *International Journal for Researcher Development*, 1(2): 160-172.
www.researcherdevelopmentjournal.org/article/view/4080. pp42-56.

Walhberg, M., Diment, K., Davies, J., Colley, H., and Wheeler, E. (2004). 'Underground working' – Types of silence. Paper presented at the RCBN Contract Researchers and Early Career Conference, Edinburgh, 2-3 December.