THE EVOLUTION OF PERSONAL FRAMES OF REFERENCE: METAPHORS AS POTENTIAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The aim of this study was to explore the value of metaphors as part of a reflexive practice in the context of the evolving frame of reference journey of PhD students in a consulting psychology programme.
Background	This study reports on the journey of how the personal frames of reference of PhD students in consulting psychology had evolved at a large open-distance and e-learning university in South Africa. As their respective journeys of becoming consulting psychologists unfolded, participants' evolutionary journeys were viewed through metaphors. Few studies have investigated how metaphors could be used as a powerful evocative tool to go beyond the rational, conscious and sanitized responses of participants, to explore their underlying frames of reference by surfacing and eliciting implicit meaning.
Methodology	This study was based on a hermeneutic phenomenological methodological stance and congruently employed principles of socio-analytic inquiry. The context of this inquiry was a PhD programme in consulting psychology presented at a large open-distance e-learning tertiary institution. Participants comprised ten PhD students. These students were required to engage in various self-reflective exercises throughout their first year, such as journaling and self-reflective essays. Their final exercise was to present their evolving frame of reference as a consulting psychologist, in the form of a visual or tangible metaphor. These final presentations became the protocols for hermeneutic phenomenological analysis in this study. Metaphors were selected through purposive sampling, and they became the "data sources" of the study.

Contribution	The study contributes to the teaching of reflexivity in consulting practice. It has implications for the training of doctoral students by making a process available through which students and consultants could access and develop their personal frames of reference. The study shares valuable pedagogical and growth experiences from the perspective of the student in consulting psychology. The research advances the field of consulting psychology by introducing the notion of metaphors as potential space and stimulates further engagement in art-based qualitative inquiry from a socio-analytic stance.
Findings	The findings suggest that metaphors have value because they create a connection to emotions, emotional processes and emotional work, facilitate the professional identity construction and reconstruction process and enable a shift from self-reflection to self-reflexivity. It is proposed that metaphors have the inherent capacity to act as potential space.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Identity tensions could be alleviated through conscious identity work, when psychologists from different categories transition into consulting psychologists. We pose questions for practitioners to consider.
Recommendations for Researchers	Doctoral programmes and research on doctoral studies should explicitly engage with both conscious and unconscious dynamics. This could relate to identity work, relationships and the power of reflexive practices.
Impact on Society	Dropout rates of doctoral students are high. The time to complete the degree is also long. This comes at a price for the student, the institution and society. Aspects related to frame of reference, philosophical assumptions, and identity work to be done by the doctoral student should be considered as critical to doctoral programmes and doctoral education.
Future Research	Future studies could investigate how consulting frames of reference relate to anxiety, identity and the well-being of doctoral students. Studies could also be conducted to see how the participants' frames of reference in this study have further evolved over their consulting careers.
Keywords	consulting psychology, hermeneutics, metaphors, potential space, reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

Consulting psychology is a specialty area of psychology and covers the application of psychology in consultation to organizations, teams, individuals and systems (Brown et al., 2006; Lowman, 2002; Nowack, 2020). A significant proportion of consulting psychologists' work happens *in and through* their bodies (Bell & Huffington, 2008; Sievers & Beumer, 2006). What happens in and through the consultant must be explored and interpreted, if that which has been observed is to be understood (Behar, 1997). Thus, the consultant becomes the "epistemological and ontological nexus" (Spry, 2001:711) upon which the consulting process turns. Once the consulting psychologist arrives at the intriguing, liberating and anxiety-provoking realization that he/she *is the instrument of consulting* (Cheung-Judge, 2012), the consultant is simultaneously confronted with the imperative, as with any other instrument, to engage in conscious introspection and self-reflection (Jamieson & Davidson, 2019).

The importance of using the self as instrument has been defined as the ability of the consultant to use self-awareness, self-behavior and leadership authority to influence the consultant-client system (Jamieson et al., 2011). A distinctive feature of consulting psychology and the value proposition of the consulting psychologist is the willingness and skill of the consultant to be aware of and integrate

the consultant's frame of reference, roles and personal consulting profile with the dynamic needs of the client system (Jamieson & Davidson, 2019; McFillen et al., 2013). As the consulting landscape becomes more turbulent, complex and conflictual, individual, team and organizational dynamics will concomitantly become more intense, complicated and toxic (Cummings et al., 2020; Diamond, 2016). This requires from consulting psychologists an enhanced awareness of their frame of reference, which is a complex set of assumptions and attitudes used to filter and assess information and experiences to create meaning (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). As such, renewed focus on empowering the consultant to work with the unconscious, below-the-surface process dynamics of the self in the consulting system is called for. These process dynamics refer to the frames of reference that consultants bring, which determine how they take up the consulting role in organizations and which have an impact on their understanding of and working with the client system. It is conjectured that all individuals, including consultants, have aspects that are engrained or hardwired in them, such as habits, favourite diagnoses and interventions that could be detrimental to themselves and the client system (Erskine, 2010). Consultants have a moral obligation to refine the use of self constantly by being willing to do reflexive work to adjust their pre-dispositional lenses and reduce their 'hardwiredness' (Cheung-Judge, 2012:46). The constraining, engrained way of thinking and functioning informs and inevitably shows up in the consultant's frame of reference, which could be a powerful consulting lens in the hand of the consultant, but also a treacherous tool if not understood well.

One of the enablers of effective consulting is receptivity (Ramos, 2007). Reflexivity, in the context of this study, is a process taught to students as prospective consulting psychologists, to think about their thinking as a form of deep learning. Students are encouraged to reflect on their worldview and the assumptions that frame the way they approach, perceive and judge the world (Smith, 2011). This reflexive work in which students engage includes using images in the form of metaphors. Metaphors seem to have more than simply aesthetic value. As human beings we live, remember, perceive, experience, think and learn through metaphors (Boeynaems et al., 2017; Grisoni & Page, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Ortony, 1975). The literature suggests that metaphors have the capacity to be used as a sense-making tool (Emson, 2016; Hendricks et al., 2018).

We therefore argue that reflexive practice is essential for the consultant to understand his/her own frame of reference and suggest that art-based inquiry, such as metaphors, is useful to elicit deeper layers of meaning in this reflexive process. There furthermore appears to be a paucity of research reporting on the inward, personal frame-of-reference journey of discovery of PhD students in consulting psychology, which forms the research context of this study. [The PhD programme is discussed in detail under the sub-heading procedure and participants.] Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the value of metaphors as part of reflexive practice in the context of the evolving frame of reference journey of PhD students in consulting psychology.

The study contributes to the teaching of reflexivity and the enhancement of self-mastery in consulting practice. It has implications for the training of doctoral students by making a process available through which students and consultants could access and develop their personal frames of reference. Most of all, it proposes the use of metaphor as potential space to facilitate such self-mastery and development of the self.

Next, the use of self in consulting, with specific reference to the consultant's evolving frame of reference, is discussed, followed by the use of metaphors in the consulting context and the purpose and power of self-reflective practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE USE OF SELF: ENGAGING THE CONSULTANT'S FRAME OF REFERENCE

In organizational consulting, the self is the consultant's most valuable asset and consultants are enabled to bring their experience, frame of reference, diagnostic and intervention skills to the client relationship (Jamieson & Davidson, 2019; McKnight & Jamieson, 2016). The use of self implies the "integration of the consultant (values, assumptions, beliefs, biases, and tendencies), client (attending, engaging with integrity and purposeful intent) and organizational development (values, principles, theory and practices)" (Rainey, 2012:114). This capacity enables the consultant to be systemically sensitive (being able to read a dynamic system), and to take appropriate action in the here and now (Long, 2016). For the consulting psychologist, sustained professional competence is therefore contingent upon consistent, deliberate self-reflection (Knapp et al., 2017) or cultivating a reflective self (De Haan, 2012). The consultant's assumptions and understanding about what it means to be human, the nature of organizations, growth, the dynamics of change and what facilitates effective and sustainable change provide specific colour and texture to their frame of reference. When engaging a client system, consultants must continuously inquire, *"what assumptions am I making and what impact do these have on the functioning of this system?"* By introducing this provocation, we argue that the accessing of one's frame of reference implies being in tune with and working with one's emotions. In doing this (engaging in emotional work), the consultant will be able to sustain dynamic awareness of his or her emotional responses and consciously work with these emotions. This is essentially what is required to fine-tune the self in the consulting context.

While it is imperative for the consulting psychologist to build self-awareness constantly through reflection, accessing the less conscious parts of the self is extremely difficult (Jamieson & Davidson, 2019). We further argue that awareness of one's emotions and emotional responses is a window into the less conscious parts of one's frame of reference (Fergusson et al., 2019). One way of accessing facets of one's frame of reference is through images (Grisoni & Page, 2010; Oswick & Montgomery, 1999). It has long been suggested that images, in the form of metaphors, have the capacity to connect the outside with the inside world (Branthwaite, 2002; Branthwaite & Holme, 1999), because images seem to have a particular connection to feelings, emotions and unconscious ideas and assumptions (Eysenck & Keane, 2000). Even Jung (1977) suggested that images have connotations beyond obvious meaning, including that which is not obvious and hidden from us.

THE USE OF METAPHORS TO ELICIT MEANING

An extensive body of work demonstrates the pervasive nature of metaphors, how they have been used to describe complexities and how they shape the way people think and behave (Hendricks et al., 2018; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). To date, there has been significant emphasis on metaphors primarily as linguistic devices (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Marshak, 1993; Tohidian & Rahimian, 2019). In this article, we argue in favour of consulting psychologists operating through their bodies and subsequently for metaphors as embodied, emotional phenomena. A metaphor is a "figure of speech containing an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase [that] is ordinarily and primarily used for one thing is applied to another" (Marshak, 1993:44) and in this process of transference, new meaning is derived. Because of the centrality of metaphors in sense-making and their usefulness to be applied in different contexts (Emson, 2016), they have been conceptualized by scholars from diverse perspectives. Lakoff and Johnson (2003), for example, have highlighted their capacity to be used as a vehicle to facilitate comprehension in that they are able to capture partially what cannot be comprehended fully. Through this capacity, an essential feature of a phenomenon is uncovered, which would have remained unshared and therefore to some extent unknown. In line with this thinking, metaphors have been defined as an evocative way of searching (imagining) for meaning (Angus & Rennie, 1989; Emson, 2016; Levitt et al., 2000). In this way, a relatively safe way of

working with ambivalence and anxiety-provoking phenomena is created by expressing unshared, covert experiences in an innocuous manner.

Metaphors, despite their complexity, contradictions and paradox-laden nature, have the potential to help us perceive and understand lived phenomena in new ways (Grisoni & Page, 2010; Veit & Ney, 2021); they have the power to untie complex interwoven patterns and interrelations (Morgan, 1986); elicit unconscious sense-making processes (Emson, 2016; Flusberg et al., 2018); and by tapping into the right hemisphere of the brain, serve as catalysts for change (Watzlawick, 1978). Moreover, metaphors convey more accurately the quality and different layers of feelings, emotions and practices, resulting in richly textured communication (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). Finally, metaphors make it possible for an otherwise complex situation to be presented in a simple manner (Marshak, 1993). Arguably, one of the most distinctive features of metaphors is their inherent connection with unconscious material (Branthwaite, 2002; Emson, 2016). Supporting this notion, Lyddon et al. (2001) propose that metaphors are useful tools for providing access to "previously unexpressed, unexplored, or even unrecognized" (270–271) material. This is directly relevant to this study, as metaphors may constitute a means of accessing the underlying frames of reference of organizational consultants. Thus, metaphors, as conduits of meaning, are explored as containers of emotional and unconscious material and, simultaneously, as framework for exploring these unconscious, below-the-surface dynamics (Diamond, 2016; Grisoni & Page, 2010; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). In this study, metaphor is operationalized as visual, verbal and psychological conceptions (cognitive capacity) that serve, or enable us to connect information about a familiar concept to another familiar concept, thus leading to new understanding. This comparative process allows for new meaning and understanding to emerge (Greene, 1994; Jensen, 2006; Wyatt, 2021).

THE PURPOSE AND POWER OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflexivity in research has been explored and conceptualized in different ways (Heyler, 2015; Mruck & Mey, 2007; Pillow, 2003). It has been suggested that reflective practice should be more accurately referred to as reflection and reflexivity (Fergusson et al., 2019). Reflection involves self-awareness (Rennie, 1992). Self-reflexivity, however, is defined as an ongoing meta-level reflective (thoughts and feelings) process about the self and how it is being experienced in the moment (Nagata, 2004). In other words, reflexivity is the process of recognizing what is happening implicitly and explicitly in the present (Engward & Davis, 2015). More recently, it has been argued that reflective practice is more than reflection and reflexivity and that it should be inclusive of a 'systematic application of a disciplined and intellectualised way of thinking' (Fergusson et al., 2019, p.12).

The potential outcome of the reflexivity phenomenon is that one would become a 'reflective practitioner' (Gentles et al., 2014). These kinds of practitioners engage in the ongoing study of their relationship with work and in the process that fosters 'self-identity, self-awareness and personal agency' (Helyer, 2015:16). Reflexivity has also been linked to identity work (Barabasz, 2016; Bettencourt et al., 2021). When transitioning to a new role, identity tensions are experienced (Breakwell, 2015), which is relevant to this study. The most effective way of addressing these tensions is for conscious identity work to be done (Pals, 2006). Identity work involves reframing through intrapersonal processes (Kirpal, 2004). In doing this, individuals strive to maintain, repair, revise or strengthen their identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus, reflection and more importantly, reflexivity, could play a facilitative role for effective identity work to be done.

Next, the methodology of the study is discussed. The methodology section includes literature review information about hermeneutic phenomenology.

METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

This study was based on a hermeneutic phenomenological methodological stance and congruently employed principles of socio-analytic inquiry. Hermeneutics pertains to interpretation, a form of data analysis aimed at analysing texts from the perspective of the author, within a given socio-historical context (Blaikie, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Grix, 2010; May, 2001). It has been advocated as a creative, dialectical and intuitive approach, which questions rigid, predetermined research methods and procedures (Crowther et al., 2015; Morse, 2000) by attempting to reveal aspects of phenomena we do not often describe, notice or account for (Crowther et al., 2015).

By doing this, hermeneutic researchers work with data in an emerging fashion that is akin to abductive reasoning (Feil & Olteanu, 2018; Roos et al., 2021); they encourage further thinking and exploration (Zambas, 2016) and are fascinated by how thinking evolves over time (Van Manen, 2014). This design, as opposed to other approaches, was applicable to this study in two important ways. First, it allowed for the explication of participants' lived experience. Secondly, in hermeneutic phenomenological studies, meaning and understanding is co-constructed by both the participants and the researcher (Lauterbach, 2018). Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology, as a descriptive (phenomenological) methodology and an interpretive (hermeneutic) methodology (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Van Manen, 2014), was the most appropriate theoretical lens for the research objectives of the study.

PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS

The context of this inquiry was a PhD programme in consulting psychology offered at a large open-distance e-learning tertiary institution. The PhD programme comprises two components. The first part (year one) consists of a series of themes presented in the form of workshops spread over five weeks throughout the year, leading to the development of a research proposal. The second part (second and subsequent years) consists of a research project, which culminates in the award of a PhD in consulting psychology. The authors of this article were responsible for theme one, entitled, "Consultation as process". In this theme, students were required to engage in various self-reflective exercises throughout their first year, such as journaling and self-reflective essays. Their final exercise was to present their evolving frame of reference as a consulting psychologist, in the form of a visual or tangible metaphor. These final presentations became the protocols for hermeneutic phenomenological analysis in this study. At the start of the year, consent was obtained from the students to use their reflective presentations as data for research purposes. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the institutional ethics committee (Reference number: 2017_RPSC_018).

Of the 10 PhD students, six were female (three black, one Indian and two white) and four were male (three white and one black). These students were predominantly industrial and organisational psychologists (IOP = 7), though two were counselling psychologists and one was a clinical psychologist. All 10 fell within the age range of 40 to 55. Finally, because of the extensively rich data produced through the use of various metaphors in the year-end presentation, this article reports on only three of the 10 students' metaphors. The three metaphors were selected through purposive sampling (Grix, 2010), and they became the "data sources" (Salkind, 2014) of the study. The three metaphors were purposefully selected by the authors based on their richness, relevance and congruence with the objectives of the study.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The students were requested to present their metaphors visually and to explain them in a PowerPoint presentation format. These written documents constituted the "data sources" for analysis and were substituted with visual imagery of the metaphors (for example images included in the slides, or

photographs of the tangible metaphors brought to class), as well as field notes made during the presentations. The instructions for the presentations were as follows:

To bring to expression your personal and professional growth, you are requested to present your frame of reference in being a consulting psychologist, in the form of a metaphor. Your presentation should be no longer than 15 minutes. The metaphor should be: (a) presented as a tangible object representing/reflecting your frame of reference; (b) explicated through a PowerPoint presentation; and (c) your frame of reference should reflect your philosophy of science, your personal growth and transformation, and the core meta-theoretical perspectives that guide and substantiate the way you practise as a consulting psychologist.

The data were analysed from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, according to the phases of naive reading, structural analysis and comprehensive understanding (Churchill, 2018; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). In the naive reading step, the data protocols were read several times to facilitate fuller comprehension of the complete data. An open mind (phenomenological attitude) had to be adopted to allow the text to speak. Thematic structural analysis was subsequently conducted by employing content analysis, which made use of codes and coding (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

Finally, comprehensive understanding was achieved by formulating an integrated structural analysis of the data sets separately, as well as the texts as a whole. This allowed for the articulation of the various meanings of the units and themes as a structural whole to emerge (Wertz, 2011). Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges and appreciates the philosophies that underpin both hermeneutics and phenomenology (Van Manen, 2014). Hermeneutics, in particular, is critical to this study, because it provides an interpretive dimension to unearth both assumptions and meanings embedded in the text, which could be difficult for participants to articulate. In this study, the findings section hones in on the naive reading and structural analysis of the analytic process, while the discussion section reports on the comprehensive understanding as interpreted by the authors.

FINDINGS

NAIVE READING AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE ANALYTIC PROCESS

Remaining true to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, as espoused by Lindseth and Norberg (2004), the authors read through the presentation data and reflected on the metaphors in an attempt to familiarize themselves with the material and gain a holistic sense of the data (naive reading). In reflecting on the metaphors, the authors became increasingly aware of the containing function of these metaphors as "vessels for unconscious thought" (Dijksterhuis, 2004:12) and the rich presentational and representational value they offered (Branthwaite, 2002). The emotional stirring these metaphors created inside the authors is perhaps indicative of the gift they seemed to offer, by facilitating access, whether directly or indirectly, to lived, felt, phenomenological experiences – particularly the "emotional connection to our self, others and our experience" (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009:56). These metaphors seemed to provide a precious glimpse of how students wrestled to access their personal frame of reference, tried to make sense of and integrated new parts of their identity into existing parts of their identities. Through subsequent structural analysis, three major themes emerged, reflective of the value of metaphor in the self-reflexive practice of students, namely connecting to emotions, emotional processes and emotional work; facilitating a professional identity reconstruction process; and shifting from self-reflection to self-reflexivity.

The metaphors and accompanying narratives of the students are presented and discussed below.

Metaphor 1: Connecting to emotions, emotional processes and emotional work

One student's experience of her evolving frame of reference was described by using a funnel as metaphor. A funnel is a pipe with a wide mouth ending in a narrow stem. Its primary purpose is to channel substances into a container or simply to avoid spillage.

She describes the funnel as having primarily two functions: a *'filtering function'* and a *'containing function'*. The filtering function appeals to her because in reflecting on her year-long development journey, she discovered a need for her to shift from a general approach to become more specific and focused in her consulting practice. This crystallising of her perspective was compared to an uncomfortable transition through the stem of the funnel and described as "*a painful process, in the form of rumbling chaos*". Her journey of growth during the year was agonizing, as is evident from the words "*The PhD gave me bullets to my head that I needed to defend against.*" It brought about emotional discomfort situated in experiencing "*loss*" when having to decide "*what do I let through*". She, however, tapped into her own agency in the process, explaining that '*a funnel also determines what goes through*' and expressed her contentment that what emerged at the other end of the funnel was "*crystalized, distilled, refined*" and regarded as "*essential, significant and noteworthy*". Using the metaphor in her proses of self-reflection therefore fundamentally served to elicit the difficult emotions she originally wanted to avoid, yet the metaphor also reflects her sense of contentment with going through the process and actively taking part in evolving the self. The funnelling experience was also compared to "*giving birth and being birthed*", which are both agonizing and exhilarating experiences. Finally, the student described the outcome of her experience of self-reflection as '*that which will ground me and would contribute towards my authenticity.*' In engaging with the self-reflexive metaphor exercise, she managed to get in touch with her emotions and most importantly, to find meaning in the difficult emotional process she went through. Ultimately the process of personal and professional growth and her evolving frame of reference as symbolized by the funnel, demonstrated how engaging with emotions helped her to feel more authentic as a consultant.

Consultants often have to assist clients with a sense-making process by helping them to extract the core essence of their experience and to distinguish between the symptoms and causes of their phenomenological state. A *containing function* must also be performed to hold that which is painful and creates discomfort, until the client is able to deal with anxiety-provoking phenomena. The student drew on the containing function of the funnel to describe her evolving frame of reference as a consulting psychologist, noting her role in "funnelling" to help the client do the emotional work required to develop the self. In the narrative of the student, the funnel as metaphor helped the student to reflect on her developmental journey ('*like rumbling chaos*'), to explore her identity ('*I am a funnel*'), and the funnel became a symbol of her frame of reference ('*funnel as my practitioner lens*'). The metaphor therefore helped the student to connect to the emotions, emotional processes and emotional work that are at the core of these experiences of personal development, identity formation and taking up the role of consulting psychologist.

Metaphor 2: Facilitating a professional identity reconstruction process

Another student identified the image of Proteus (Figure 1) as a metaphor of his personal and professional development and evolving frame of reference. In Greek mythology, Proteus was an early prophetic sea god or god of rivers and oceanic bodies of water. Some refer to him as the god of "elusive sea change" (Jung & Kerényi, 1963). Proteus knew all things, past, present and future, but disliked divulging what he knew. Those who wished to consult him had to surprise and bind him while he was asleep. When caught, he would try to escape by assuming different shapes, but if held fast, he would return to his proper shape, provide the requested answer and disappear into the sea (Jung & Kerényi, 1963).

The student describes his purpose as a consulting psychologist as 'to align myself with local entities who have a shared sense of purpose and community-support endeavours aimed at scientific excellence, business and marketing understanding and long-term economic sustainability'. He identifies aspects of his personal frame of reference as consulting psychologist in Proteus, particularly the 'reluctance to spontaneously share knowledge, time and expertise – knowledge has value.' It seems as if the student's frame of reference, through the Proteus metaphor, is also informed by purposeful resolve. In the story of Proteus, tenacity and resilience are always rewarded. Furthermore, the student describes the demands on consulting psychology as follows: The 'need for

collaboration is highlighted by bringing the university, communities and business together through student research, relevant (real-world demands) and accessible scientific psycho-social research, the application of critical thought to practice, and making a difference in support of social good.'

Figure 1. Proteus
Source: Permission for use of image from www.mythology.wikia.org (Behar, 1997)

In the student's narrative, he regards working at an unconscious level as a 'daunting, anxiety-provoking' process. This metaphor also presents and represents the student's desire to become a relational practitioner. Furthermore, the purpose includes the resolve to identify and respond to 'real-world demands' by entering into partnerships (working across boundaries) in the interest of the common good. The student further notes in his discussion on Proteus that: "Having to know everything is daunting." This insight facilitated a shift in his identity from believing that as consultant I need to know everything, to I do not need to, and I do not know everything. Proteus also seems to symbolize the identity struggle of "who I want to be versus who I am." In a related reflection he also observes that: "knowledge is our containment." Thus, when we realise we know little, or our knowledge is challenged, this containment crumbles. This in turn challenges one's identity, for example, who am I without knowledge?

The value of utilising a metaphor in this context appears to be that it brought the student into contact with his desire to be a relational practitioner, his purpose to align himself with entities who have a shared sense of purpose, his resolve as consulting psychologist to address real-world demands and the realisation that reflexive work is an anxiety-provoking process.

Metaphor 3: Shifting from self-reflection to self-reflexivity

The third student provided a two-pronged preamble to his identified metaphor. The first was a brief presentation on his basic beliefs about life, being human, and the nature of organisations. He summarized his beliefs as follows:

> *All organizations are human – humans define psychology – psychology defines my role and identity; diagnostic, curative and preventative approaches all need to co-exist; I lean towards the Humanistic paradigm, with a specific focus on positive psychology; We are the instrument and require regular fine-tuning, restoring, rebooting and rewarding; I am a scientist!*

Despite this perceived positivistic stance (*'I am a scientist!'),* the student appears to recognize and experience the value of self-reflexive work (*'We are the instrument and require regular fine-tuning, restoring, rebooting and rewarding.'*) He then goes on to share how the year has affected his beliefs, by noting the following:

> *What I don't know is more than what I do know, but I know more than people who think they know a lot; Pop psychology is delicious and easy to consume, like an ice cream, but has minimal nutritional value … ; Regained belief and confidence to speak to the intra-psychic aspects of people, as much as the systemic aspects of organizations; Reminded that the conscious and unconscious may be of the most critical compasses/lenses by which to assess the true state of organizational affairs; Become relentlessly suspicious of all so-called truths and facts – reignited the scientist in me; Freed myself up to bring psychology back into my consulting – deliberately!; I am more valued/valuable than I give myself credit for.*

Perhaps to contextualise his metaphor, or to highlight that his PhD journey was reminiscent of another journey, the student prefaced his metaphor by sharing a deeply personal journey. On one of his visits abroad, he was presented with a gift in the form of a knife by a total stranger – an unexpected gift, with immense depth, detail and subsequent sentimental value. In his reflexive work, he equates the knife to the role of consulting psychology. Furthermore, the knife epitomizes his journey of identity construction during the year. This narrative, in a very explicit manner, demonstrates how the student started to recognise and experience the value of reflexive work. Reflexivity differs semantically from being reflective, in the sense that it points to the recursive and continuous nature of being a reflexive practitioner, as noted by the student: *"we all become a consulting psychologist but becoming a consulting psychologist is a journey that continues."* In his reflexive work, he comes to realise how he has grown both personally and professionally; how his thinking has shifted, for example: *"Keeping with the easy part of positive psychology or pop psychology is like bedding myself down … I have been a half psychologist for so long"*; how his confidence as practitioner has evolved; and which additional theoretical frames should be included in his practice.

DISCUSSION

COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING

The aim of this study was to explore the value of metaphors as part of a reflexive practice in the context of the evolving frame of the reference journey of PhD students in a consulting psychology programme. Our findings suggest that metaphors help students to connect to their emotions, emotional processes and the emotional work to be done; secondly, metaphors facilitate the professional identity construction and reconstruction process; and finally, metaphors enable a shift from self-reflection to self-reflexivity as a deeper form of learning.

With regard to students' phenomenological experiences of the self-reflexive exercises, the impression was that it was a painful cognitive and emotional struggle. In this context, the value of using a metaphor seems to be that it helps one to get in touch with one's emotions and the emotional process, which is a painful, anxiety-provoking process. Furthermore, metaphoric work could also assist by helping us find meaning in and through difficult emotional processes. Metaphors, through reflexive practice, appear to facilitate sense-making and meaning-making as a result of this emotional

work (Emson, 2016). Images, such as metaphors, also elicit interpretive narratives as an integral part of the sense-making process (Costantino, 2003). In persistently doing this difficult, emotional work, one starts to feel authentic as a consultant because one becomes more attuned to one's emotions and working with one's emotional responses and processes. This finding seems to be congruent with a study by Stein (2016), in which the anxiety-provoking nature of emotional work, particularly in the context of identity, is highlighted.

An interesting observation in this study is that using metaphors as an aid in self-reflective work is also facilitative of role identity work. Identity work invariably involves dealing with issues of values, assumptions, purpose and value propositions, and is a continuing struggle to find balance and resolve tensions between the self and professional work demands (Adams & Crafford, 2012). Such issues relate to refining one's frame of reference, which could trigger anxiety because it entails an attempt to simultaneously distinguish the self as unique, while also seeking coherence with or belonging to a specific work context (such as the consulting psychology fraternity) (Kreiner et al., 2006; Saayman & Crafford, 2011). To capture identity succinctly is an elusive and personally challenging task, as identity is not a single entity (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Students seem to struggle with this professional identity reconstruction process – transitioning into the consulting psychology role. In this study, metaphoric work brought students in touch with their perceived consulting tasks (expressed as filtering, containing, and carving) and helped them to explore their role identity as consulting psychologists. In addition, metaphors also seem to create a connection to one's desire, purpose and resolve. Thus, it brings one in touch with what has been described as one's aspiring identity (Sheyholislami, 2008) as consultant. Metaphoric work, through reflexive practice, serves as a vivid representation of aspects of one's identity as a consulting psychologist. This work also brings the student to the realisation that working with identity and aspects related to the unconscious could be anxiety-provoking.

The final finding of this study is that metaphors appear to enable a shift from simple self-reflection to self-reflexivity. Reflection involves self-awareness; however, reflexivity entails self-awareness plus agency within that self-awareness (Rennie, 1992). Through reflexivity, the self (identity) evolves in some significant way, because there is intention and action behind simple reflection (Hibbert et al., 2010; Linder et al., 2019). This seems to capture the value of metaphoric work. In this study, through their narratives, students appear to recognize and experience the value of self-reflexive work. For example, in the third metaphor, the student comes to the realization that he has grown as a person and as a professional, how his thinking has shifted, how his confidence as a consulting psychologist has increased and which additional theoretical lenses he should include in his practice. In doing this reflexive work, the student has become aware of how his identity journey has evolved during the year. It is clear from this study that reflexivity creates personal meaning and nurtures self-awareness that results in action and resolve. This sensemaking activity is made possible through metaphoric reflexive practices, which then become a catalyst for change. Hence, Tohidian and Rahimian (2019) argue that metaphors have the potential to influence individual behaviour.

A further characteristic of metaphoric work is that the metaphor seems to have an unconscious grounding function in the mind. In the consulting role (i.e. what the role does to the consultant), consultants generally want to keep clients happy, often by assuming different shapes for different clients in a dysfunctional manner. In this process of being to the client whatever the client wants, the authenticity of the consultant is likely to be compromised. In this turbulent and competitive world of organizational consulting, the frame of reference of the consultant should strive to facilitate holding, grounding and authenticity. To echo the words of Johnson (2019: viii), "when we are safe and sound, confident and clear, then we can help our clients come home to the same place."

This study provides some evidence that seems to suggest that it becomes 'easier' for consultants to speak to the intrapsychic aspects of people and organisational systems when they are in tune/in step with their own intrapsychic realities and dynamics. Reflection on our frames of reference seems to facilitate this critical, predominantly unconscious psychological work. Metaphors seem to provide a lens into the unconscious (Armstrong, 2005). Thus, written reflection and imagery appear to facilitate

the uncovering and illumination of deeply emotional, psychological and unconscious phenomena (Schoeneborn et al., 2016). As consultants, we cannot arrive at a fuller appreciation of organizational life by ignoring the unconscious life of the organization (Brunning & Perini, 2010). We suggest that the utilization of a metaphoric lens, as entry into the unconscious, is one way in which consultants will be able to remain faithful to the 'psychology' in consulting psychology.

What is somewhat surprising about how the participants made sense of their metaphors is that aspects of the presented metaphor and the explanation (narrative) provided sometimes appeared to contradict one another. Perhaps this is a reminder that metaphors, despite their capacity to hold contradiction (Emson, 2016), are paradox-laden and by their nature do not seem to have the capacity to provide a holistic picture of the frame of reference of the consultant. This is congruent with Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) argument that they are not always able to capture entire experiences, but rather provide partial, as opposed to full, comprehension and communication. Thus, metaphors should be viewed as snapshots of the common, yet unique journeys of the participating students and their frames of reference. Moreover, what is encouraging is the indirect affirmation that the consultant is first and foremost a *human* instrument. This makes the call by Rogatschnig (2016:1) so much more compelling: "… we are the instrument and require regular fine tuning, restoring, rebooting and rewarding …"

In an attempt to move the field forward, we want to propose that metaphors have the inherent capacity to act as potential space (Amado, 2009; Jemstedt, 2000; Long, 1992). Potential space is a relational and psychological space, which is accessed by adopting a particular way of being, in relation to the 'other' (Jemstedt, 2000). Metaphors as potential space seem to have particular value for consultant identity work and simply 'thinking about thinking' (reflexivity). Furthermore, metaphors allow for play in a Winnicottian fashion, because "only in playing is communication possible … only in playing can the individual become creative … it's only by being creative that the individual discovers himself" (Winnicott, 1971). This is exactly what the exposure of a frame of reference through imagery does. This playful process shows us who we are, and perhaps reminds us what it means to be human. Finally, ambivalence is a natural outcome of this iterative process and should be expected and embraced. This ambivalence and iterative process also suggest a shadow side to the application of metaphorical work. Metaphors are simultaneously highly contested, value-laden and carriers of subjective meaning (Grisoni & Page, 2010). Paradoxically, value (potential space) is to be found in both the expansive and constraining qualities of metaphors. Thus, it is crucial for consultants to surface and investigate the personal, cultural, political and epistemological assumptions they are making through reflexive practices. In other words, 'what is it that I see/don't see/don't want to see/find too painful to see?' as consultant.

In light of the perceived value of imagery, qualitative researchers are increasingly turning to art-based inquiry (Grisoni & Page, 2010; Porr et al., 2011; Ramos, 2007; Schwandt, 1994) in the form of photoelicitation and photovoice (Bignante, 2010), pictures and storytelling (Ramos, 2007), projective techniques in the form of images and conceptual metaphors (Branthwaite 2002; Porr et al., 2011), and the use of collage, painting and poetry to extract often unconscious meaning that is embedded in the cultural and biological contexts of participants (Costantino, 2003). The researchers therefore aimed to explore the value of metaphors by following the evolutionary personal journey of their students. This was done by transcending the traditional, sanitized mode of inquiry, in favour of an arts-based inquiry, building on the creative capacity of abductive reasoning in knowledge construction. This arts-based inquiry, which took the form of a conceptual metaphor, was able to connect participants with their inner, underlying frame of reference.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study, the authors used imagery in the form of metaphoric expressions as a powerful analytical and evocative tool to reveal the personal and professional journey of development and evolving frames of reference of participants. This use of imagery is related to the philosophical

underpinnings of hermeneutic phenomenology. Methodologically, it accentuates the sacred, lived experiences (phenomenology) of participants, while simultaneously listening to the whispers (surface and possible depth) of the metaphor (hermeneutics). In this way, sensitivity to both the human meanings and the humanity of the participants is preserved (Churchill, 2018). The study thus advances art-based methodologies as avenues of inquiry. The study also has implications for consulting in general and organizational interventions, in particular. In this way, it supports the call for metaphoric expression as a creative, playful process of inquiry (Cleary & Packard, 1992; Emson, 2016).

This study advances the field of consulting psychology by introducing the notion of metaphors as *potential space*, from a relational and psychological perspective (Amado, 2009; Amado & Elsner, 2007; Flotman et al., 2019; Ogden, 1985; Mnguni, 2010). Through metaphors, hidden potential is unleashed in such a way that this unique figure of speech and embodied phenomenon has become and subsequently remains what is known as potential space. 'Space' describes 'an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute' (Winnicott, 1975:230). Potential space is therefore a relational and psychological space, through which opportunities and possibilities are identified and explored by adopting a particular way of thinking (Jemstedt, 2000). Contemporary organisations are far from safe spaces. They have often been referred to as "sites of moral violence" (Allcorn & Diamond, 2004). It is only in safe potential spaces where Mnguni's (2015) "purposeful play and playful work" will become an organizational reality. In this regard, it is suggested that consultants create conversational spaces and use imagery to regularly explore the impact of the frame of reference on how their consulting role is taken up and the impact this has on their consulting work. In this way, consultants will be able to work more consciously with their behavior on an individual, group and organizational level (James & Huffington, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2006; Reciniello, 2014). In the same way that coaches need debriefing and supervision, perhaps consultants also need space for their consulting experiences to be explored and debriefed.

The study holds a further implication for language use in the consulting space. Consultants use language, which includes metaphors and other forms of linguistic expression, to intervene and interact with the client system. In this context, metaphoric expression provides access to the collective unconscious of the organization. Greater awareness of how consultants use language is therefore encouraged (Flotman et al., 2019).

Despite the rich and imaginative capacity of metaphors and hence their presentational and representational value, it has always been contended that metaphors can limit new insights because of their ambiguous and at times superficial nature (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Metaphoric expression also operates by simultaneously highlighting certain aspects of a phenomenon, while hiding other aspects. A single metaphor therefore only provides a partial view, instead of a fuller view (Morgan, 2011). This study does not explain exactly how the metaphor is at work. Perhaps this is the result of the fact that only one central metaphor was analysed per student. It is clear from the presentation of the data that there were other alternative, competing metaphors. However, the metaphoric journey was one of raising awareness rather than reporting on the shift from one metaphor to the next. In making this argument we strive to provide further impetus to the notion that metaphors, as a way of seeing (Morgan, 2011), both shape and constrain (limit) our experiences of the world in general and in the context of this study, consulting psychology in particular. There is a danger in allowing a single dominant metaphor to frame the way in which the world is perceived, instead of adopting multiple ones. In this study, the participants' final metaphor was informed by a prolonged reflective writing process and a presentation, which in itself included other forms of imagery. In the absence of multiple data sources, a lingering thought will always remain: "Is the analogy really appropriate, or is it misleading – or perhaps both?" (Tohidian & Rahimian, 2019).

In the light of this study, it would be intriguing to explore how frames of reference and imagery in general relate to the dark side of consulting. Qualitative studies on how consulting frames of reference relate to anxiety, identity and well-being are also strongly encouraged. A follow-up study

could also be conducted to see how the participants' frames of reference in this study have further evolved over their consulting careers.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the value of metaphors as part of a reflexive practice in the context of the evolving frame of the reference journey of PhD students in a consulting psychology programme. The study confirms that metaphoric expressions as powerful, personal and phenomenological experiences are imbued with meaning, because they form an integral part of participants' "past, present and future lived experiences" (Eatough & Smith, 2006:118). Pertinent to students' phenomenological experiences of their developmental process was that it was a painful cognitive and emotional struggle and manifested as a wrestle with identities. The students' journey was also reflective of an iterative process to uncover their underlying frame of reference.

Metaphors seem to reflect facets of the consulting role being taken up by the consultant and hint at the presence of idealizations in the consulting role. What is further emphasized in these metaphors (frames) is that it takes us to identity work and deep learning. Thus, metaphors through reflexivity appear to facilitate sense-making processes and serve an unconscious grounding function through the metaphor-in-the-mind. The utility value of metaphors is further captured in that they create new understanding of experiences, dislodge new possibilities, and consequently act as catalyst for personal and professional change. Metaphors seem poised to draw attention to particular unconscious dynamics during the consulting process, for example anxieties being created and defences being triggered. Images, therefore, in Jung's (1964) words, possess connotations beyond obvious meaning. As discussed, the use of images/metaphors has methodological implications, has consequences for consulting psychology and has the capacity to act as potential space, which should be harnessed in the interest of individual, group and organizational well-being. In light of these functionalities, metaphors proved to be an invaluable bridge to explore, analyse and interpret the evolving frames of reference of PhD students.

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