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Metaphorically Speaking…
Paradigm and the Use of Metaphor
in Career Conversations

ABSTRACT

Since theorists like Inkson (2002), Mignot (2004), Amundson (2009) and McMahon & Watson (2012) have introduced metaphor as a valuable component in careers work, not a lot of empirical research has been added. To contribute to the need for empirical research, a qualitative study was performed to explore the actual use of metaphors in career conversations. The main aim of the study is to contribute to the theoretical and empirical knowledge base to enhance professional practices of career development. The research question was how career practitioners and their clients conceptualize careers in career conversations by the use of metaphor. The study also explored the differences in the use of metaphors when looking at the conversational role of the participants. For this purpose, the use of metaphor through two types of career practitioners as distinguished by NICE (career professionals and career advisors) was analysed. By applying the MIPVU metaphor identification procedure, 861 surface metaphors, clustered into 19 metaphor themes were identified in 18 recorded career conversations. All nine metaphor themes as identified by Inkson (2004) were found as well as the *Game* and *Chaos* metaphors as described by Prior & Bright (2009). Besides that, seven other metaphor themes were detected:

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Career as *Physics*, *Liquids*, *Objects*, *Views*, *Constructs*, *Time(line)*, *Projects* and *Art*. Differences in the use of metaphor themes were found between clients and practitioners and between *career advisors* and *career professionals*. Based on the findings, career practitioners are recommended to actively develop awareness of their clients' and their own paradigmatic thinking (deep metaphors) that is revealed by the use of metaphor. By doing so, they can consciously and instrumentally integrate that awareness in their professional repertoire. The academic field is recommended to expand empirical research on the role of metaphors, the paradigms that are revealed by them and the level of deliberateness and intentionality of metaphor use.

In his book entitled *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work,* philosopher Alain de Botton (2000) quotes a career counsellor, who tells him that his favourite metaphor for career guidance is the *metal detector*. In the quest for their competences and passions, clients need to behave like treasure hunters to scan the soil for "beeps of happiness." De Botton uses the metal detector as a metaphor for careers work.

Since authors like Inkson (2004), Mignot (2004) and Amundson (2009) articulated the utility of metaphor in career conversations, not a lot of empirical research on the identification of metaphor in careers work is available. Creed and McIlveen (2017, p. 4) state that within recent career development literature "the impetus toward the analysis of metaphor is ostensibly stalled" and that no strong methodological advances have been made since then. So, there seems to be a need for empirical research on the way people actually apply metaphoric language to conceptualize careers. Such research can contribute to the knowledge base to enhance practices of career development. To contribute to this need for empirical research, a qualitative study was performed. A set of recorded career conversations in different settings was analysed to explore the actual use of career metaphors and to identify the

way both career practitioners and their clients use metaphors to conceptualize careers.

Career practitioners may benefit from a better understanding of the way their clients talk about and perceive career issues through the use of metaphors. They also can develop a better awareness of their own paradigms and mind frames that are revealed by their use of metaphors in their sessions with clients. By doing so, they can consciously and instrumentally integrate that awareness in their professional repertoire. A better understanding of a client's career language can be used in a creative and playful way to intentionally enhance clients' awareness of their (paradigmatic) mind-sets and their competences in the search for other perspectives to redefine and redesign career issues.

The key question addressed in this study was what career metaphors and metaphor themes can be identified in the daily practice of career practitioners in their sessions with clients. Can career metaphors as described by career theorists like Inkson (2004) actually be identified in careers practice? What other metaphor themes do people use in the privacy of the career counsellor's office? And is it possible to find clues about similarities and differences? Are there indications that career professionals use other metaphors than their clients? And do career professionals[1] use other metaphors than career advisors? No known empirical research has been done to explore these specific questions in the actual careers practice. This article aims to contribute to filling that gap.

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[1] Referring to the NICE Types of Career Practitioners as described by Schiersmann et al. (2016).

METAPHOR THEORY: LANGUAGE, THOUGHT
AND COMMUNICATION

Morgan (1983, p. 1) stated that metaphors are "a basic structural form of experience through which human beings engage, organize, and understand their world." Metaphor theory is a field that originally was based in linguistic science (Ortony, 1993). Lackoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor is not only part of our language; it is pervasive in everyday life, both in thought and in action. In his Contemporary Metaphor Theory (CMT), Lackoff (1993) distinguishes two perspectives in the study of metaphor. Besides the linguistic perspective, he emphasises the conceptual perspective. People use metaphor to conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. Everyday use of metaphor is characterized by a large system of cross-domain mappings. This means that metaphor is omnipresent in our conceptual thinking (Lackoff, 1993). In addition to Lackoff's CMT, which distinguishes the *linguistic* and the *conceptual* perspective, Steen (2011) identifies the *communicative* perspective, the social approach in which the level of intentionality and deliberateness of metaphor use is of relevance (Steen, 2011).

Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) distinguish three levels of metaphorical thinking. *Surface metaphors* are the metaphors we use in daily language. *Metaphor themes* are the common dimensions underlying the surface. They reveal underlying concepts and paradigms. *Deep metaphors* operate largely at the subconscious level. They structure what we think, hear, say and do. They represent the human universals. They are enduring ways of perceiving things, making sense of what we encounter and guiding our subsequent actions (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008).

For the research on the use of career metaphors, this classification is of relevance because the distinction of the three levels can be used to identify patterns of thought in the language used in career conversations. By detecting surface metaphors, we can

explore metaphor themes and the deep metaphors beneath the surface that people use to conceptualize careers (see Figure 1).
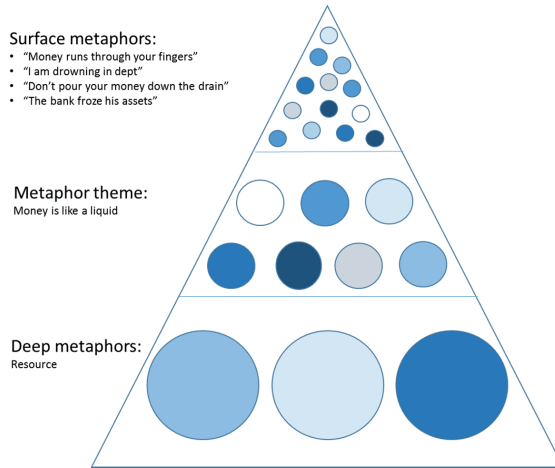

Figure 1. Levels of metaphorical thinking (adapted from Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008).

METAPHOR IN CAREER THEORY

Recent publications by Amundson (2009), Inkson (2015) and Savickas (2015) have emphasised the value of the use of metaphor in career guidance and counselling. A constructivist approach to career guidance and counselling asks for "building tools and materials" to construct with. Career narratives are created by the use of language and through the possibilities that language provides to – literally – give meaning to the way we think and communicate about career. One of the earliest modern theorists to address the issue of metaphors was Morgan (1983). Since then, many theorists have published on the role of metaphor in careers theory (Mignot, 2004; Amundson, 2009). Inkson (2002) found that when people are asked to use a metaphor to summarize their

careers, over 50% use *career as journeys* as the leading metaphor. He proposed nine specific metaphors for career as *inheritances*, *actions and constructions*, *cycles*, *matching or fit*, *journeys*, *encounters and relationships*, *roles*, *resources* and *stories* (Inkson, 2004). Inkson stated that the use of metaphor may well be dictated by the role of the user or chooser (for example, career holder, parent, counsellor, employer, change activist, self-help writer). Through his contributions, Inkson provided the scaffold to look systematically at career theory and practice from a metaphorical point of view. Others have distinguished similar or different metaphors. Schein (1978) spoke of career *anchor* and Powell & Mainiero (1992) conceptualized women's career development as *currents and riverbanks in the river of time*. Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) used the metaphor of a *kaleidoscope* and Pryor & Bright (2009) used the *chaos* and the *game* metaphors to describe the complexity of the career development process in their chaos-theory approach to careers.

In the field of psychotherapy and counselling, quite a large body of empirical research can be found (Tay, 2013; Mathieson, et al., 2015). But in terms of empirical career research, the issue can be seen as rather underexposed. El Sawad (2005) interviewed blue collar workers in a large company in the UK and found eight (groups of) metaphors (*Journeys*, *Competition*, *Horticulture*, *Imprisonment*, *Military*, *School-like surveillance*, *Wild West*, and *Nautical*). Smith-Ruig (2008) analysed the way workers in the accounting profession used Inkson's *Journey* metaphors in their description of their career. In a similar way Peake & McDowall (2012) described the way mid-career individuals conceptualize the career transition they are in using the open-systems approach of chaos theory as a guiding metaphor. Dahan (2014) performed an exploratory study of the way middle managers in the aeronautics industry talk about career success. She created four groups of archetypal vehicles (*Roadster*, *Humvee*, *Hybrid*, and *Sedan*) as metaphors to represent the concept of movement and speed on the career path (Dahan, 2014). Creed & McIlveen (2017) analysed a set of

recorded student reflections about their university experiences. The most frequently used metaphors that students used where labelled as metaphoric themes as described by Inkson (2004): *Action and construction* and *Encounters and relationships*. A third group of metaphors they found (Mental or physical *objects)* was not mentioned by Inkson though.

The methodology in all of these empirical studies was a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with respondents about their careers. No empirical studies where found in which the use of metaphor in real life career conversations in the privacy of the offices of career professionals was the object of study. The aim of this study was to fill that gap.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE CAREER CONVERSATION

In order to explore differences in the use of metaphor between the participants in the career conversation, two roles can be identified: the client and the helper. Another phatic difference in the conversation may lie in the professional role or level of professionality of the helper. This range may vary from (for instance) a career counsellor, a school mentor, a job coach or an outplacement officer. Within NICE, a serious attempt has been made to create a European competence standard for the academic training of career practitioners (Schiersmann et al., 2016). Besides a set of professional roles, the NICE framework distinguishes three types of career practitioners with distinct *professional task profiles*:

- *Career Professionals* see it as their vocation to support people in dealing with complex career-related challenges. Career services can be seen as their core business.
- *Career Advisors* have vocations in fields different than careers, such as teachers, placement managers, psychologists or social workers. Career services can be seen as belonging to one of their tasks.

- *Career Specialists* specialise in a particular area of profession-ality or a specific professional role that can be distinguished in careers services. This can be, for instance, assessments, management tasks, policy making, research and develop-ment, or academic training or teaching in CGC (Schiersmann et al., 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore possible differences in the use of metaphor in career practice a selection of real-life career conversations was recorded, collected and analysed. Career practitioners were asked to col-laborate and to ask for permission of their clients to record their conversation.

As in most qualitative research, the sample size was directed by the nature of the research questions rather than the generalisabil-ity. In the collection of data, a maximum variation/heterogeneous purposive sample was created in which a proportional repre-sentation of participants' parameters like age group, gender, educational background, professional role, professional context and stage in the helping process was considered.

The raw data existed of 14 recordings of F2F career conversa-tions and 4 digital transcripts of e-coaching sessions. The 18 career conversations were transcribed and anonymised. The next step was to detect the use of metaphor by both the professionals and their clients. To do so, a method for metaphor identification was used. The Metaphor Identification Procedure of the Vrije Univer-siteit of Amsterdam (MIPVU) was developed to distinguish the use of metaphor in oral or written texts (Steen et al., 2010). By fol-lowing the MIPVU procedure, the chance of missing a metaphor or misinterpreting it was diminished. Following the six steps of the MIPVU helped to identify the metaphor fragments of the career conversations. After that, the 18 transcripts were split into

36 datasets, separating the contribution of the clients and the ones of the practitioners. After the identification of metaphors in the transcripts, a process of qualitative analysis by open, axial and selective codification led to the description of the use of metaphor themes by the participants in the conversations. Because the research took place in the Netherlands, the metaphors were identified in Dutch and translated into English afterwards.

In order to explore the differences in metaphor use when looking at the conversational role, an analysis was made of the proportional differences in the frequency in which certain metaphor themes were used. Without any pretention of generalisation this creates the possibility to search for differences in the use of metaphor. Following Boroditsky (2000), such a quantitative approach can lead to hypotheses on proportional differences in the use of metaphor between participants in the career conversation. As a step to fill the gap in empirical research on this issue, this can help future research to focus on these proportional differences. It also can help careers practice gain better understanding of the influence these differences can have on the way participants speak and think about careers.

Thus, an overview could be created of the used metaphor themes and the similarities and differences between the professionals and their clients in the different conversational settings. In the analysis two of the three NICE types of Career Practitioners were used to distinguish differences between the *career advisor* and the *career professional* (Schiersmann et al, 2016). The third type (*career specialist*) was not included in the analysis since in most cases this role does not imply direct client contact.

RESULTS

The final dataset existed of 36 participants taking part in 18 recorded and transcribed career conversations in a variety of contexts: three colleges for secondary vocational education; three organisations in the field of Supported Employment/Job coaching; four private bureaus for career guidance and counselling and two organisations for local employment services. By fortunate coincidence, it was possible to obtain a set of four transcribed e-coaching sessions from one service provider.

The qualitative analysis resulted in a code tree that includes all surface metaphors identified in all contributions by all participants in the conversations. Using the MIPVU in all 18 career conversations in total 861 metaphor fragments were detected and after that grouped into 19 metaphor themes (see Figure 2):
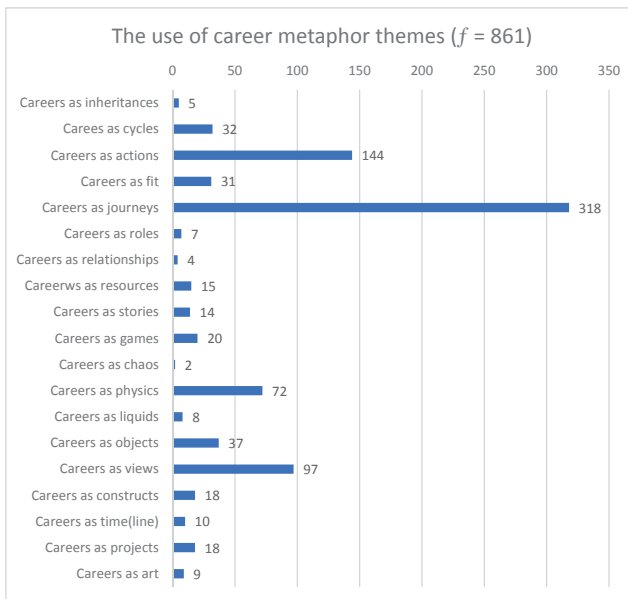

Figure 2. The use of career metaphor themes (¦ = 861).

Of the 861 MIPVU fragments that were found, 561 metaphor fragments were used by practitioners and 300 by their clients. Although this does not claim statistical significance, it indicates that practitioners in general seem to make more use of metaphoric language than their clients. There also were quite remarkable differences in the intensity of the use of metaphor language. In the practitioner's contribution to Conversation 5 *(5/P)*, for instance, no less than 71 MIPVU fragments were detected. On the other hand, in Conversation 1 the client *(1/C)* did not use any metaphor language at all.

Besides the fact that the practitioners used metaphors more frequently, Figure 3 shows that they used some metaphors more
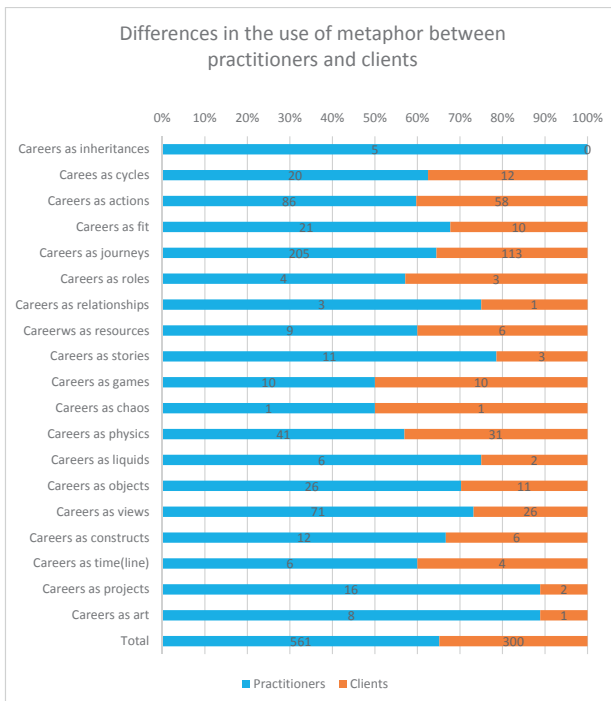

Figure 3. Proportional differences between the participants.

frequently than their clients. An example of this is *Careers as inheritances*. This metaphor theme is referred to only by practitioners ($\c = 5$) and not once by clients ($\c = 0$). Other metaphor themes proportionally preferred by practitioners are the *Careers as projects* and *Careers as art* metaphor theme. Metaphor themes that approach a 50/50 proportion are the metaphor themes in which the user sees careers as *Actions*, *Physics*, *Games*, *Roles* and *Chaos* (see Figure 3).

Within the contribution of the practitioners, it is possible to identify differences between the types of practitioners involved. In Figure 4, the proportional differences between the two types are displayed. Because there is a difference between the number of career advisors ($n = 7$) and career professionals ($n = 11$) the proportions are presented in percentages. The figure shows that
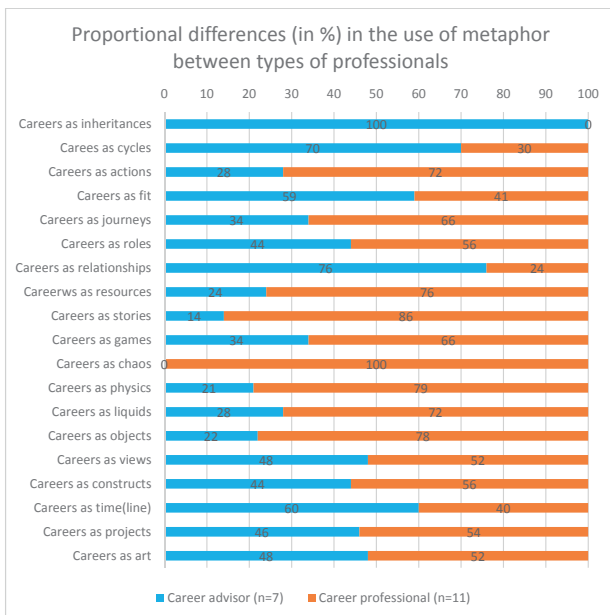

Figure 4. Proportional differences between career professionals and advisors.

the career professionals generally made more use of metaphors than career advisors.

Figure 4 shows that there are quite a lot of differences between the two types of practitioners. The *Careers as chaos* metaphor theme was only used by career professionals. On the other hand *Careers as inheritances* was only used by career advisors. Other metaphor themes used more often by the career advisors were careers as *Cycles*, *Time(line)* and *Relationships.* Career professionals proportionally tended to make more use of the metaphor themes *Journeys*, *Actions*, *Physic*, *Objects*, *Games*, *Resources*, *Stories* and *Liquids.*

CONCLUSIONS

The variety of metaphor themes found in this study shows that the metaphors that are identified in career theory by theorists like Inkson (2004) and Pryor & Bright (2009) actually are used in real-life career conversations. It also shows that it is possible to identify more and other metaphor themes.

Proportional differences in the use of metaphors by the different participants in the career conversations indicate that there could be a relation between the use of metaphor and the role the participant has in the conversation. This implies that Inkson (2004b, p. 99) was right when he stated that "the choice of metaphor may well be dictated by the role of the chooser (for example, career holder, parent, counsellor, employer, change activist, self-help writer)." The findings show that differences can be found between the different roles in the conversation. Practitioners used more and other metaphors than their clients. And career professionals made more use of metaphors than career advisors. Although the top five metaphor themes between the two groups is quite similar, there also are differences in the frequency in which some of the metaphor themes are used.

How can these findings contribute to career theory and practice? Following Lackoff (1993) and Steen (2011), awareness of the communicative use of language can help to better understand thought. Language in general, and metaphor especially can be used to detect and better understand a person's ways of conceptualising the world and giving meaning to it. Career practitioners can benefit from a greater awareness and a better understanding of the way their clients talk about and perceive their career learning and development by the use of metaphors.

At the same time, practitioners can develop awareness of their own use of metaphors and the deep metaphors (paradigms and mind frames) they can reveal. Referring to De Botton (2000) the practitioner can use metaphors like a *metal detector* to scan the surface and investigate the metaphor themes and deep metaphors and paradigms beneath. At the same time, practitioners can reflect on their own use of metaphors to raise awareness of their own paradigms and mind frames.

This is the sort of professionalism Watson (2006, p. 52) referred to when he argued that there is a strong obligation for career practitioners to examine and understand their own constructions of how the world operates in order to "understand and accommodate the cultural contexts in which their clients live and work."

To do so, we can make use of a classification proposed by Steen (2011). Conscious metaphors refer to the application in language and communication. Unconscious metaphors refer to deep metaphors or paradigms in thought. Helping clients to become aware of the conscious and unconscious use of metaphors can help them understand their (paradigmatic) thinking. Following Steen (2011), one of the key recommendations of this study to workers in the career field is to create awareness of the use of their conscious and unconscious metaphors (see Table 1).

Table 1. Conscious and unconscious use of metaphor.

	Practitioner	**Client**
Conscious metaphors	Practitioners can improve the use of conscious (surface) metaphors by examining their own repertoire of metaphors and expanding them consciously.	Practitioners can enhance awareness of the role of metaphor by using metaphorical and other narrative tools and instruments to help clients construct and reconstruct career issues.
Unconscious metaphors	By analysing their own metaphor vocabulary and by consciously examining their own career language and the deep metaphors and paradigms revealed by them practitioners can improve their awareness of own mind-sets and the way they influence career conversations with clients	By consciously helping clients to reflect on their unconscious use of metaphors practitioners can support clients in creating awareness of their deep metaphors and personal paradigms. And by doing that, practitioners can help clients in creating other ways of looking at and perceiving their career issues.

Authors like Savickas (2012) and McMahon and Watson (2012) have addressed the value of metaphors in a narrative approach. Lengelle and Meijers (2013) proposed Career Writing, a narrative method in which the client is helped to learn from an event or (career) experience they call a *boundary experience*. In their method they use metaphors as a way to contribute to the actual construction of a (career) narrative. By making the metaphor a central subject in the conversation, career issues can be redefined, which can lead to new insights and the exploration of new possibilities. This method is a good example of a way to intentionally use metaphors as an active ingredient of a narrative approach in career guidance and counselling (see Figure 5).
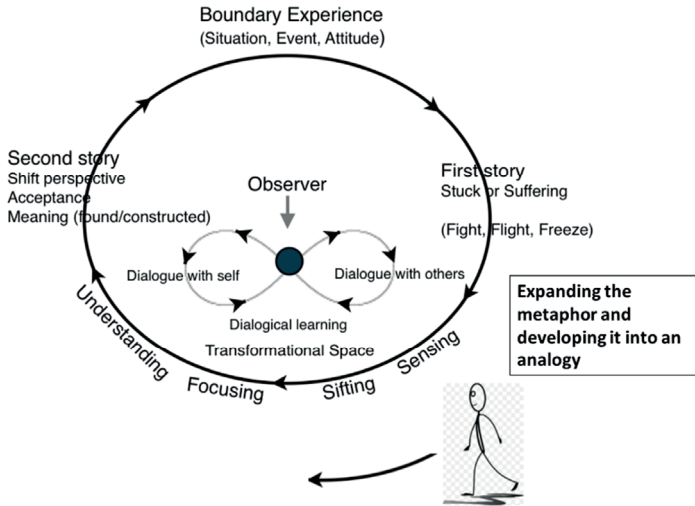
Figure 5. Metaphors in career writing – a narrative approach (Adapted from Lengelle & Meijers, 2016).

As Steen (2011) argued, it is important to take a closer look at the difference between conscious and unconscious metaphor use. We cannot distinguish if a participant in the conversation is a (non-deliberate) *user* of metaphors or a (deliberate) *chooser*. The level of deliberateness to choose a certain metaphor would be an interesting topic for further research. This could be studied by combining this study's methodology with other research methods. For instance, by reviewing and analysing the conversation together with the participants and probing for the *level of deliberateness* of the metaphors used. Another suggestion for further research could be the expansion of the field of study to other factors that can play a role in the use of metaphor. Based on the findings of this study the following additional research questions are suggested:

- What differences in the use of metaphor are there between formal and informal career conversations? What metaphor

themes are used in conversations between peers or between parents and their children?

• What differences can be found when looking at other factors that may play a role in the use of metaphor? Are there differences when we look at for instance age, gender, level of education or cultural background? Are there differences when we look at the organisational context or at stages in the helping process?

Additional research following these lines of exploring the role of metaphors in the day-to-day language and thought in career conversations can contribute to the expansion of the theoretical understanding of the way people conceptualize careers and at the same time can contribute to enhance careers practice.

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