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Metaphor and the notion of control in trauma talk

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Abstract: Metaphor use in psychotherapy practice has been influenced by conceptual metaphor theory and the “internal target–external source” assumption, where targets comprise abstract therapeutic issues, while sources comprise concrete conceptual materials external to the therapeutic setting. The relevance of metaphor is hence questionable in trauma talk, since traumatic events involve intense bodily experiences which are already concrete and do not require any external inferential support. We examine transcripts of semi-structured interviews with 14 subjects following the 2010–2012 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand, focusing on the role of metaphor in their conceptualization of a sense of “control” over their immediate physical environment, and more abstract aspects of their lives in the earthquakes’ aftermath. We discuss four discursive patterns which show how speakers used metaphor as a mechanism to extend or refocus initial discussion of physical control, to subsequent discussion of abstract control. This suggests that metaphor goes beyond a conceptualization role to play a “scaffolding” role in trauma talk, where an initial target topic may serve as a source concept for a subsequent target topic. Therapists therefore do not necessarily have to “look externally” for productive source domains, but could capitalize upon conceptual materials which present themselves as therapeutic interaction unfolds.

Keywords: metaphor, psychotherapeutic counseling, trauma, control

1 Introduction

In psychotherapeutic interviews and counseling, mental health practitioners aim to understand and discuss feelings, values, attitudes, and behaviors which are deemed to be affecting the well-being of clients (Meltzoff and Kornreich 1970). The often abstract nature of these topics suggests that metaphors may be a

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useful means of describing and conceptualizing them in more concrete ways. Metaphors perform diverse functions in practitioner–client interaction such as relationship building, accessing and symbolizing emotions, uncovering and challenging assumptions, working with client resistance, and introducing new frames of reference (Cirillo and Crider 1995; Lyddon et al. 2001). The use and management of metaphors in counseling has consequently attracted considerable attention in the mental health and discourse analytic literature alike.

This paper focuses on the role of metaphor in conceptualizing a critical sense of “control” in the lives of trauma victims of the 2010–2012 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand. We begin by reviewing the influence of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) on psychotherapy practice in terms of what we call the “internal target–external source” assumption. We then suggest how the nature of trauma talk calls this assumption into question, which motivates three specific research questions on the nature and role of metaphor when “control” is discussed by these earthquake victims. After explaining our methods and data, we present our results and elaborate on the theoretical and practical implications of what we call the “scaffolding” role of metaphor in trauma talk.

1.1 Conceptual metaphor theory and the “internal target–external source” assumption

Practitioners within different therapeutic schools of thought who share an interest in metaphor use (Kopp and Crow 1998; Neimeyer and Mahoney 1995; Wickman et al. 1999) have been commonly influenced by conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), which articulates a link between patterns of language and cognition. The main premise of CMT is that metaphorical expressions at the linguistic level describe associations between concepts in such systematic ways as to suggest stable links between these concepts at the cognitive level, known as conceptual metaphors. For example, the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY can be inferred on the basis of seemingly isolated expressions such as *our marriage has come a long way*, *the highway of love*, and *if you love each other, you will cross these hurdles together*. Furthermore, conceptual metaphors enrich our understanding of relatively abstract “target domains” (love in this example) by transferring or mapping inference patterns from relatively concrete “source domains” (journeys), and in some cases metaphors are claimed to be necessary for conceptual understanding (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). The same metaphors which motivate our thinking may also motivate social action, as is the case for conceptual metaphors like TIME IS MONEY, which is claimed to shape remuneration practices in many societies.

CMT thus shares with contemporary therapeutic approaches the notion that perceived reality can be linguistically constructed, and that thought patterns can influence one's behavior (Beck 1995; Guidano 1995). The idea of metaphor as a mechanism of inference transfer also dovetails with key assumptions about the nature of psychological afflictions. Since psychological experiences can be abstract and difficult to describe literally, practitioners and clients may benefit from the use of appropriate metaphors as concrete descriptive and inferential resources. A client may for instance communicate his experience of bipolar disorder as being "like a balloon" (Kopp 1995), while a practitioner may caution his/her client that living with anorexia is like trying to drive a car without petrol (Stott et al. 2010). Much of the mental health literature on metaphor has therefore assumed that, when metaphors are used as a strategy, the target domain(s) naturally comprise abstract therapeutic issue(s) at hand, while the source domain(s) comprise concrete "external" resources ranging from near-universal (Rosenbaum and Garfield 2001) to culture-specific and idiosyncratic knowledge and experiences (Dwairy 2009). This, which we call the "internal target–external source" assumption, has applied to both therapist-centered approaches, where the emphasis is on practitioners supplying useful metaphors (Blenkiron 2010; Stott et al. 2010), as well as client-centered approaches, which highlight the role of clients in generating their own metaphors (Kopp and Craw 1998; Sims 2003). To the extent that it neglects to consider how particular discursive circumstances may motivate different patterns of metaphor use, we may describe this assumption as entertaining a fairly decontextualized view of metaphor.

1.2 The case of trauma talk and the notion of control

This paper considers in the mental health setting the shift in metaphor research from the decontextualized perspective of CMT to greater consideration of the contextual nature of metaphors in real life text and talk (Gibbs 2010; Low et al. 2010; Steen 2011). Consistent with recent works which examine the therapeutic nature of metaphors with respect to the circumstances of their use (McMullen 2008; Tay 2013), we ask whether there are cases where the internal target–external source assumption may not hold, and if metaphors remain useful or relevant then. A case in point is what may be called "trauma talk" – where people discuss the experiences and consequences of one or more natural or man-made events such as sexual assault, serious injury, or the threat of death to self and others. Trauma victims may experience high levels of anxiety and hyperarousal, recurrent intrusive memories of the event(s), and a tendency to avoid these memories, all of which are symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

Previous studies on the language of PTSD patients have focused on narrative content (Boulanger 2007; Pennebaker 1993), coherence (Foa et al. 1995; Van Minnen et al. 2002), and indeed most recently, metaphors (Wilson and Lindy 2013). The studies on patient narratives focus on how discursive categories such as *repetitions*, *(dis)organized thoughts*, *sensations*, *actions*, *fillers*, *details* (Foa et al. 1995), and forms of emotional and cognitive expression (Pennebaker 1993) correlated with improvement measures, while Wilson and Lindy (2013) discuss how culturally entrenched metaphorical themes such as “the journey of the hero/survivor” can be used to frame the overall process from initial impact to recovery.

In this paper, our point of departure is the observation that since traumatic events involve intense bodily experiences, they are already concrete in the CMT sense, and should therefore not require any external inferential structure in order to be described and conceptualized. Readers may refer to an earlier paper by the first author (Tay 2014) which discusses this observation from the different theoretical perspective of “source–target simultaneity” in metaphor use. If the internal target–external source assumption were indeed undermined as such, the question is whether and how metaphors still play a relevant role in trauma talk, and what theoretical and practical implications this would raise.

Among the principally open-ended range of trauma-related experiences which may be topicalized in trauma talk, the common notion of a sense of control may be of particular significance. In psychology, the theoretical construct of personal control has been conceptualized as a fairly abstract and multifaceted regulator of affect, behavior, and cognition, and has become a key element of many psychotherapy theories (Frank 1982). While it is important for most people to feel that they can exert some influence over the environment, and the action and behavior of self and others, victims of traumatic experiences who are often left feeling vulnerable and helpless may feel an overwhelming need to do so. This is underlined by recent findings which suggest that interventions designed to restore the perceived loss of self-control in the lives of earthquake victims may be sufficient to treat PTSD (Salcioğlu et al. 2007).

The relationship between trauma talk about control and metaphor becomes apparent when we consider the multifaceted character of the former – on the one hand, trauma victims are likely to experience a concrete or physical loss of control as a result of their experiences. On the other hand, there is also the notion of a more abstract loss of control over non-physical aspects of their lives, such as relationships, lifestyles, and emotions. Focusing on how trauma victims discuss these different senses of control with reference to their respective experiences may therefore shed light on the continued relevance of metaphor, under discursive circumstances different from the conventional “internal target–external source” scenario.

1.3 Research questions

We examine transcripts of interviews conducted with people who experienced the series of earthquakes and aftershocks which hit Christchurch, New Zealand, between 2010 and 2012, and ask the following questions: (i) how the multi-faceted notion of control is conceptualized and communicated by earthquake victims; (ii) whether and how a more concrete sense of loss of control, associated with direct physical experiences with the earthquake, is discursively related to a more abstract sense of loss of control, associated with non-physical aspects in the earthquake's aftermath; (iii) whether and how metaphor plays a role in this process.

2 Method

2.1 Participants and data

Between 2010 and 2012, a series of severe earthquakes and aftershocks claimed almost 200 lives in the New Zealand city of Christchurch and surrounding areas. Individuals who were referred by general practitioners to a clinical service for treating earthquake-related post-traumatic stress symptoms, and met the criteria for full or sub-threshold PTSD, were invited to a semi-structured interview at the Clinical Research Unit of the Department of Psychological Medicine at The University of Otago, Christchurch. The interviews, lasting an hour on average, asked participants about their earthquake experiences, other sources of stress following the earthquakes, and their coping strategies. The objective was to better understand the meaning they attach to these experiences, with a view to informing clinical practice. The study was approved by the Upper South Regional Ethics committee with informed consent from participants. Data for this paper come from transcripts of interviews with a random sample of 14 participants.

2.2 Procedures of analysis

A discourse analytic approach was used to identify and analyze instances where the interviewees and subjects discussed the notion of control in trauma talk, and how metaphors are involved in the process. Discourse analysis, which refers to a broad and eclectic range of approaches to investigating language use in social contexts, has the underdeveloped potential to inform counseling practice by

revealing, among other things, how therapeutic issues and solutions are constructed in language (Spong 2010).

The present approach is largely inductive and data-driven in that the categories, phenomena, and their attendant relevance to the research questions emerged only upon qualitative scrutiny of the data. It is structured by three major steps. Firstly, to identify instances where the notion of control was discussed, the transcripts were searched for the lexeme “control” and its other grammatical forms (e.g., controls, controlled, controlling). Secondly, the identified instances were examined against surrounding turns in order to demarcate individual extracts, each of which focused on a coherent topic related to the earthquakes. Lastly, instances of metaphor use in these extracts were identified and discussed with reference to how they support the conceptualization of control. Metaphors were identified with the discourse dynamics approach (Cameron and Maslen 2010), where some stretch of language ranging from single lexical items to clauses is deemed metaphorical if there is a contrast between the basic and the contextual meaning expressed, and the latter is demonstrably understood in comparison to the former.

3 Results

Step 1 yielded a total of 62 instances of “control” and its variants across all transcripts. The topical demarcation of these instances in Step 2 yielded a final total of 46 extracts, since “control” may appear more than once within an extract. Analysis of these extracts revealed three major categories of control talk. The first, which we call *physical control*, consists of 15 cases where people confine their discussion to how the earthquakes affected their control of their physical bodies and environment. The second, which we call *abstract control*, consists of 21 instances where people discuss the notion of control as regards their emotions, lifestyles, and other such issues. The third category, *physical–abstract interaction*, which became the primary focus for the analysis in Step 3, consists of 10 extracts where both physical and abstract control were discussed over consecutive or near-consecutive turns, suggesting some discursive relationship between them.

Examples of the first two categories of physical and abstract control will now be presented, followed by detailed analysis of examples of physical–abstract interaction. The speakers are labelled I (for interviewer) and S (for subject), and referred to with feminine pronouns for stylistic consistency. Linguistic details of interest, including but not limited to metaphors, are underlined in the transcripts. Square brackets are used in place of personal details to preserve anonymity.

3.1 Physical and abstract control

Physical control refers to instances where subjects focused on the impact of the earthquakes on their physical bodies and environment. For instance, in example (1) below, the subject comments that “everyone’s got no control” over the physical damage to buildings.

- (1) The subject comments on the physical damage of the earthquakes
- 1 I: How’s that affected you the loss of, other buildings, it sounds as though your own home has been relatively spared but there’s some surrounding things that have been changed. How’s that been for you?
- 2 S: It’s been very sad. It was quite stressful going into town and seeing it. It was upsetting, you know to think that people, especially with the earthquakes where people lost their lives and that to think that that could happen. Because you just, a building has always been solid. **It’s like the three little pigs, it’s built of bricks it should stand up, withstand a lot of things.** But um, yeah, it’s sad and I feel sad for the people and the animals and really everyone’s got no control over it.

In contrast, abstract control refers to instances where people discussed more abstract issues such as strains on interpersonal relationships, problems with seeking help and compensation from authorities, lifestyle challenges, and so on. Examples (2) and (3) illustrate this. In example (2), the interviewer mentions a “loss of control over emotions”, while in example (3), the interviewer and the subject discuss the loss of control over eating habits.

- (2) The interviewer comments on the subject’s loss of control over emotions
- 1 I: So you’re ok, and you mentioned that first thing you were sort of worried about was the sort of almost a sort of loss of control over emotions.
- 2 S: Control, yeah.
- (3) The interviewer and subject discuss the subject’s loss of control over eating
- 1 S: Mm, I mean I’ve always had problems with food, but after the earthquake, like before the earthquake I was a normal weight, now I’m 30 kilograms up from what I was before the earthquake.
- 2 I: And you put that down to binge eating?
- 3 S: Yeah.

- 4 I: Do you feel out of control with your eating or is it?
 5 S: Yeh I feel out of control, my weight has stopped going up, I've come down a few kilograms but there's a long way to go.

3.2 Physical–abstract interactions

These are instances where subjects discuss both physical and abstract control over (near) consecutive turns, often in response to interviewers asking questions such as *were there any other impacts?* or *what have been your biggest fears and concerns since the earthquake started?*. It can be observed in the following extracts how interviewers and/or subjects appear to utilize the inferential logic of loss of physical control, due directly to the earthquakes, to conceptualize and describe the subsequent loss of abstract control in other aspects. The way in which metaphors support this process thus constitutes a challenge to the “internal target–external source” assumption, in that instead of recruiting external source concepts to elaborate therapeutic issues, there is a “scaffolding” effect where previously mentioned therapeutic issues serve as sources for subsequent therapeutic issues. Six examples which collectively highlight different facets of this scaffolding mechanism will now be discussed in detail. Each example is preceded by a short introduction to the context.

- (4) The subject discusses her loss of physical control and concern for her granddaughter following the earthquakes.
- 1 I: Ok, so just thinking about um, the various earthquakes to start with, but what kind of immediate impact did they have on you? What was the sort of, the way they affected you most of all?
- 2 S: I think it was loss of control.
- 3 I: Yep.
- 4 S: It's like sitting at the back of a jumbo jet, you know you've, you've sort of got that feeling you're not in charge.
- 5 I: Yep.
- 6 S: Someone else is dictating what's happening.
- 7 I: Ok, so that was really difficult. So you right, you felt that immediately?
- 8 S: Pretty much.
- 9 I: Yeah.
- 10 S: Like if you're in a, a car and someone's doing something silly you have the ability to stop it and get out.
- 11 I: Mhm.

- 12 S: Whereas this was no control, no control.
- 13 I: Yeah, yeah. And what kind of emotional impact did that have on you straight away? I mean you were out of control, you couldn't control it.
- 14 S: I don't. I really just, it was a mixture. I had concerns for my granddaughter.
- 15 I: Yep.
- 16 S: You know, all in the fleeting moment. Concerns for my daughter ... Um, didn't really have concerns for stuff I owned.
- 17 I: Mmm. This is the February one when you were in town?
- 18 S: Pretty much, pretty much all of them, I didn't have concerns about stuff I owned but I had concerns about, people I couldn't get hold of and.
- 19 I: Yeah, so people you cared about.
- 20 S: Mmm.
- 21 I: And that was the most critical thing for you. Yeah. So not being able to get hold of them was a big thing.
- 22 S: Mmm. Absolutely.
- 23 I: So worrying about them, not being able to get hold of them, feeling like you're out of control.
- 24 S: Mmm.

This example illustrates a straightforward case of transitioning from a discussion of physical control to abstract control. The interviewer asks about the “immediate impact” (turn 1) of the earthquake, which could have been interpreted either literally (i.e., physical impact) or metaphorically (e.g., emotional impact). The subject focuses on its physical sense and describes her “loss of control” (turn 2) like “sitting at the back of a jumbo jet” (turn 4) and worse than being “in a car and someone’s doing something silly” (turn 10) because she is completely unable to influence what happens (turns 6, 12).

In turn 13, the interviewer then refocuses the discussion from physical to “emotional impact” while maintaining the established theme of loss of control. This prompted the subject to discuss her concerns for loved ones in subsequent turns, before the interviewer summarizes the proceedings in turn 23 by reiterating the notion of control. Notice that, although the interviews were planned to elicit immediate experiences of the earthquakes before moving on to other stressors and impacts, there is no inherent link between the two aspects. It is the interviewer who knowingly or otherwise suggests this link by implying the polysemous nature of “control.” Turn 13 in particular represents a pivotal point where the subsequent discussion on emotional impact might have scaffolded

upon the inferential structure provided by the previous discussion on physical impact. The expression “get a hold of them” in turns 18, 21, and 23 is particularly telling. If deemed metaphorical, in that the subject is describing interpersonal contact in terms of physically getting a hold, it could then be argued that the metaphor is partly motivated by, and simultaneously supports, the discursive transition from one target topic to another (i.e., physical to emotional experience).

- (5) The subject discusses her avoidance of Christchurch, her studies, and relationship with her partner
- 1 I: One of the things that you did to try and cope with the feelings and the anxiety and the sleeplessness, and being on guard and being vigilant and jumpy, was to try and avoid coming back to the city, coming back to Christchurch. Did you do other things to try and cope with how you were feeling in yourself?
 - 2 S: Yeah, yep. I did, I went to see someone overseas when I was really not feeling in a good way and I tried some of the things that were suggested to me. Such as, in relation to sleep, sleep therapy stuff
 - 3 I: That was a psychologist that you saw over there?
 - 4 S: Yes, yeah. Um, I only had about three sessions so I didn't get a huge benefit from it. I mean it was good because I was really feeling quite low, but it wasn't just the earthquake that I was talking to her about. I mean it was the earthquake and how awful I was feeling and how worried I was feeling about that. But then, it was almost like everything else in my life was up for question. Like, everything felt so uncertain and like the whole ground had shifted, not just literally but under everything that I, you know, had going on and you know I was questioning do I even want to do my studies, not only do I want to stay here, do I want to break up with my partner because obviously that issue comes up when you're talking to someone about how you might not want to come home.
 - 5 I: So where you were living, your study and whether you're away from your partner, trying to control these.

Here, the interviewer asks the subject what other coping strategies she used to manage her anxiety and sleeplessness other than avoiding Christchurch (turn 1). The subject relates that she had visited a psychologist overseas (turns 2 and 3) as she was feeling “quite low” and uncertain about “everything else” in her life (turn 4). While “low” is an interesting metaphor for her mood, the more relevant metaphor here is “the whole ground had shifted” (turn 4), which to her is both literally true

with regard to the earthquake, and metaphorically true as a description of the uncertainty in “everything [she] had going on” (turn 4). Perhaps even more apparent than example (4), we see how the conceptualization of non-physical aspects of well-being such as studies and relationships are metaphorically scaffolded upon physical experiences of loss of control. Notice that in this example it is the subject who initiates the transition from one set of issues to another, rather than the interviewer. This interviewer–subject distinction, also observable from the other examples, will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

- (6) The subject talks about her house and about dealing with authorities in charge of earthquake-related issues.
- 1 I: so you liked living there?
- 2 S: We loved living there, we thought it was just, we could put our feet up and thought wow this is the life. We loved it, we adored it.
- 3 I: Are you still in the same place?
- 4 S: Yeah, yes.
- 5 I: Ok, so there’s more on that later, so in that day you kind of switched from dazed to somewhat practical focus, how did it go for you over the next weeks and months?
- 6 S: It was probably the worst, even almost as bad as the earthquake was that night. Um, the ground was still moving.
- 7 I: Right.
- 8 S: Um, and we were in the dark, we didn’t know what the future was going to, we didn’t know whether there was going to be a really bad one, we were aware that there could be, we were aware that something perhaps even worse could happen. I don’t know, we didn’t know. It was that unknown in the dark.
- 9 I: So that first night.
- 10 S: It was very frightening. We were lying in bed and [partner] said, but we’re pretty practical people, and he said, we’ve just been kicked in the butt by Mother Nature, now we’re going to get kicked in the guts by the authorities ...

The subject talks about how she loved her house (turn 2), located near the coastline in a relatively isolated region. In turn 5, the interviewer refers to “that day” of one of the earthquakes, how the subject had switched from being “dazed” and worried about her relative isolation to being focused on practical issues in the aftermath, and how she had coped since then. She replies that the aftermath was almost as bad as the physical earthquake itself (turn 6). Turn 6 (“the ground was still moving”) and turn 8 (“we were in the dark”, “that

unknown in the dark”) are noteworthy. On the one hand, they could be literal descriptions of the earthquake. On the other hand, consistent with previous examples, they could be metaphorical descriptions of the general aftermath, where the concrete source concepts of a moving ground and darkness are mapped onto the abstract notion of uncertainty. While turn 9 seems to suggest that the interviewer understood it literally, turn 10 equally suggests that the subject is ready to entertain inferential links between the earthquake and a major part of its aftermath. Her experience with “mother nature” and “the authorities” are respectively described as a kick to the butt and the guts. The physical impact of the earthquake is thus perceived to be similar to the non-physical aftermath, in ways which could have been further explored.

(7) The subject discusses her experience with the earthquake from the top of a bridge.

1 S: So, and um, so I got to the top of the over bridge and then that six* hit and that was my, the beginning and the end for me. So I think because I actually felt physically in peril that has caused me to be psychologically affected.

2 I: Yeah.

3 S: Because I couldn't do anything.

4 I: Yeah.

5 S: Yeah, and that, the whole thing is control.

6 I: Yep. So you were actually at the top of the over bridge and you, you told me before what you saw, what was it that you actually saw?

7 S: Well, it was, the power, the, the light bulbs moving and the whole bridge moving and the crack, the crack in front of me's what really did it.

* Richter scale magnitude of the earthquake

A difference between this and the previous examples is that instead of a transition motivated by perceiving a metaphoric link between physical and abstract control as the talk unfolds, the subject appears to have conflated the two notions from the start. In turn 1, she directly attributes her psychological disturbance to her exposure to physical danger, and regards both sets of experiences as involving the notion of control (turn 5).

Notwithstanding the subtle difference between the discursive characteristics of transition (examples [4]–[6]) and conflation, the categorization of both physical and abstract experiences under the superordinate theme of control (Glucksberg 2003) creates a potential scaffold between the present and the future discussion. It allows the more tangible and inferentially robust nature

of physical experiences to be called upon, if so desired, for the discussion of more abstract issues, since both are conceptualized to be somehow equivalent.

- (8) The subject compares the earthquake experience with her prior experience of living in another “dangerous” country.
- 1 I: So generally did you feel safe in [country] or just, did you feel safe enough? Or was it just accustomed to living in a slightly dangerous place.
 - 2 S: I think also you get accustomed to it, but you just didn’t you just stayed. You didn’t go into, a slightly more dangerous area as such.
 - 3 I: So you have ways of staying safe and protecting yourself.
 - 4 S: Yeah.
 - 5 I: And so you felt relatively safe within those boundaries.
 - 6 S: yeah I think so.
 - 7 I: So the difference between this situation and Christchurch, you’ve got a dangerous situation?
 - 8 S: I think here’s different, the difference is that, um, on the whole the danger came in to us, it wasn’t sort of surrounding us, whereas here you never know whether a building is suddenly going to fall down or um, if, the world is suddenly going to do this again.
 - 9 I: Was there a sense that back then you had some sense of control over how much exposure you had to danger?
 - 10 S: Yep, I think so.
 - 11 I: So here, what does that feel like? You know, when the earthquakes?
 - 12 S: Well basically, I’ve been and I am still avoiding situations that I don’t like very much.
 - 13 I: So you’re trying to exercise a sense of control over your safety by avoiding what you see as high risk situations, but you can’t avoid the earthquakes.
 - 14 S: No, no they just happen. But, they’re so out of the blue too.
 - 15 I: Has that been the hardest thing?
 - 16 S: Yeah I think so. Yeah. I think like most people I like to know that I’m sort of in control of my life.
 - 17 I: Sure.
 - 18 S: But when there’s sort of rumbling from underneath you, there’s nothing you can do.

The interviewer guides the subject to compare the earthquake experience with her previous experience in another “dangerous” country (turns 1–7). The subject concludes that although both places are dangerous, she could at least anticipate the

danger “coming” in that country whereas in **Christchurch, the danger “surrounds” her** because she would “never know whether a building is suddenly going to fall down” (turn 8). While this metaphorical comparison of danger focuses on the physical situation of falling buildings, the interviewer frames the situation more generally by relating both her past and present experiences to a “sense of control” (turn 9), categorizing both as “high risk situations” (turn 13). Similar to example (7), an inferential space is created where the speaker could take the earthquake as a metaphorical reference point for other non-physical aspects of her life where control is an issue. The subject appears to utilize this inferential space when she reflects that she likes to be in control of her life (turn 16), but that nothing can be done when there is “rumbling from underneath” (turn 18) – a potential metaphor for the aftermath motivated by a physical aspect of earthquakes.

(9) The subject discusses her frustrations with dealing with the Earthquake Commission (EQC)

1 I: Did you feel that you were kind of being **overlooked or left behind** or something like that?

2 S: Exactly, yes, yes. That’s a good way of putting it. I just felt that yeah, **I’d been overlooked** and, and it was very frustrating because I could see every day the things that needed fixing.

3 I: But you weren’t able to do anything about.

4 S: But I wasn’t able to do anything about it, and again it was one of those situations where you put a lot of things on hold, pending.

5 I: Yeah.

6 S: Um, and, you know that’s the situation I’m still in. Although I have, I have them actually starting work next Monday.

7 I: It’s a different kind of pending isn’t it.

8 S: Yes.

9 I: You’re seeing some action. When you’re sort of waiting and you’re seeing things happening around you but nothing’s happening for you, how was that making you feel in terms of how in control of the situation or how, you felt helpless or anything like that?

10 S: Well you feel you don’t have any control at all. You feel that there are **other people out there who are calling shots, who are in control**, but you yourself have no influence over, what is something pretty important to you.

11 I: Mm, your home.

12 S: Your home. And what may or may not be wrong with it. Yeah so, that feeling that you couldn’t control the situation, you couldn’t get

any action. Is, over that sort of timescale it was, very frustrating and in the end it starts to **grind you down.**

- 13 I: So that sort of, you mentioned already, that sense of can't control the earthquakes at all. The situations out of control there, and then you're feeling out of control, well not out of control but not in control with the EQC.
- 14 S: Not knowing where I sat there and you know eventually as time went on, it did become, it sort of became larger and larger and larger an issue in my mind.

Here, the metaphors of **“overlooking”** and **“left behind”** (turns 1 and 2) are used by the interviewer and the subject to describe how the Earthquake Commission (EQC), an organization in charge of insurance claims settlements, was felt to have neglected the latter's case. The interviewer relates her sense of frustration with the notion of being **“in control of the situation”** (turn 9). In agreement, the subject feels that she has no control or influence over something important to her, that control is in the hands of **“other people out there who are calling shots”** (turn 10), and that the situation is **“grinding [her] down”** (turn 12). Observe how in turn 13 the interviewer draws a link between the ongoing discussion, which has been about an abstract sense of control over EQC, with the physical situation of the earthquakes. Particularly interesting is the interviewer's initial conjoining of the earthquake and the subject's frustration, with the phrase **“out of control”** (**“the situation's out of control there, and then you're feeling out of control”**), and the quick repair (**“well not out of control but not in control”**) after apparently realizing that **“out of control”** does not seem to properly describe the subject's personal dealings with EQC. Despite this, the implication that both sets of experiences are thematically equivalent is maintained. It appears from turn 14 that the subject accepts this conflation as she describes both as a singular issue becoming **“larger and larger”**. **As we have repeatedly seen, the metaphoric transfer in relating an abstract sense of control to a physically concrete sense of control plays the role of scaffolding two different topics. The key initial issue of the earthquake and its traumatic impact does not simply remain as a target domain as one might expect, but instead becomes a useful source domain upon which other issues are scaffolded.**

4 Discussion

The previous section illustrated several types of discursive interaction between concrete and abstract conceptualizations of control in trauma talk. Four discursive

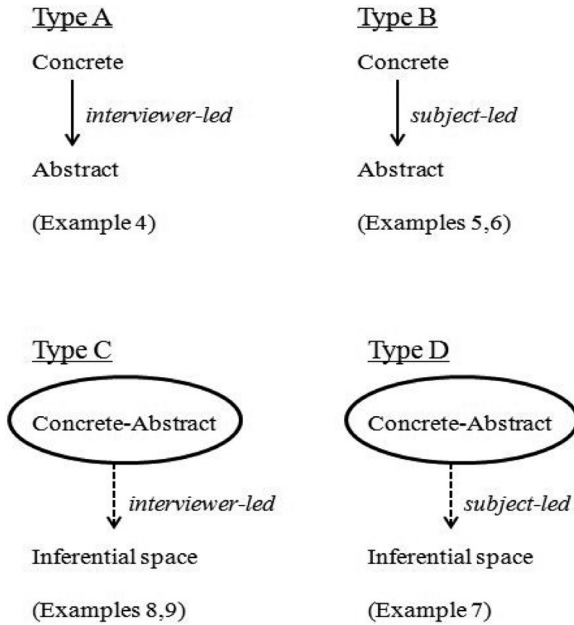


Figure 1: Patterns of discursive interaction in trauma talk about “control.”

patterns can be abstracted from these examples, schematically presented as Types A to D in Figure 1. They outline answers to the present research questions; i.e., how “control” is conceptualized and communicated, the discursive relationship between physical and abstract control, and the role of metaphor.

Types A and B, reflected in examples (4) to (6), represent instances where discussions of concrete experiences transit to discussions of more abstract experiences, with potential exploitation of the inferential space afforded by the former. Types C and D, reflected in examples (7) to (9), represent instances where concrete and abstract experiences appear to be “conflated” and understood with reference to a more general sense of control. These also lead to the creation of a potential inferential space which can be exploited in subsequent discussions of abstract issues.

The examples further reveal that metaphor can play a supporting role in this process. Consistent with the CMT premise that concrete experiences tend to be recruited as sources, and abstract experiences as targets, we see how people draw from the inferential structures provided by their physical earthquake experiences when talking about the non-physical aftermath, in the context of reflecting upon their degree of control over the situation. However, different from the conventional “internal target–external source” assumption in much of

the mental health research on metaphor, the source concepts used in these examples of trauma talk are not derived from conceptual materials external to the therapeutic situation, but are internally recruited. The initial target topics of physical earthquake experiences, which do not require any metaphorical source but are themselves suitable metaphorical sources, are opportunistically recruited to talk about more abstract consequences of the earthquake. Metaphor may therefore go beyond a conceptualization role to play a “scaffolding” role in supporting topical transition in the unique discursive situation of trauma talk (cf. Ponterotto 2003).

The notion of scaffolding can be related to similar observations made elsewhere. Source concepts which appear to be used not only for inferential productivity, but also for their non-metaphorical relevance to some aspect of the target topic at hand, as is the case with the examples in this paper, have been called “topic-triggered” (Koller 2004) or “situationally triggered” metaphors (Semino 2008). Koller and Semino made their observations in the context of newspaper and magazine articles, where the main function of such metaphors is likely to be rhetorical in nature, such as to create impact and humorous appeal. In the present context of trauma talk where different topics are discussed in a sequential and semi-spontaneous way, and where humor is likely to be less desirable, the main function of scaffolding appears to be to facilitate and enhance cohesion instead.

Scaffolding can also be related to the process of “(re)formulation” in psychotherapy (Antaki et al. 2005; Davis 1986), where a therapist derives a professionally informed interpretation from what the client says, and attempts to get the client to accept this interpretation as a new perspective on the issue at hand. In the present examples where transitions are interviewer-led (i.e., examples [4], [8], and [9]), metaphor may make introducing the “new perspective” on abstract experiences seem more naturalistic and acceptable to subjects and clients.

Another noteworthy distinction between the four types pertains to the therapeutically relevant issue of whether the scaffolding is initiated by interviewers or subjects. Types A and C are interviewer-led, as observed from examples (4), (8), and (9), while Types B and D are subject-led, as observed from the other examples. Assuming that similar discursive patterns occur in actual therapy talk as they do in these interviews, subject- or client-led instances may suggest that clients have the resources to facilitate or contribute toward their own treatment, as programmatically stated in “client-centered” approaches to healthcare (Mead and Bower 2000). This notion is echoed more specifically in discussions of whether metaphors in psychotherapy are best initiated by therapists (Lankton and Lankton 1983; Stott et al. 2010) or clients (Kopp 1995), though the onus still lies with the therapist to notice, manage, and use them for therapeutic benefit, no matter who the initiator is.

5 Implications for psychotherapy practice

Similar to Tay (2010, 2012), which show how contextual analysis of particular metaphor patterns may bear implications for psychotherapy practice, this paper offers two general points. Firstly, the demonstrated exception to the “internal target–external source” scenario, together with the scaffolding function of metaphor, collectively suggest that therapists who utilize metaphor as a conscious, deliberate strategy do not always have to “look externally” for conceptual materials to construct therapeutic metaphors. They can also “look internally” and be sensitized toward conceptual materials which potentially arise from the unfolding discussion. Kövecses’s (2009: 16) general observation that “our knowledge about the entities participating in the discourse [...] plays a role in choosing our metaphors in real discourse” is particularly apt here.

Secondly, in the context of such “information gathering” interviews which may serve the purpose of determining which subjects are likely to require follow-up therapeutic assistance, a distinction could be claimed between those who actively extend the physical dimension of traumatic experiences onto other aspects of their lives, and those who may find it sufficient to disclose memories of their experience to an empathetic listener. That is to say, interactional scrutiny of how “control” and other relevant themes are conceptualized by individuals at a preliminary stage, prior to formal diagnosis, may contribute toward the assessment of appropriate follow-up action.

6 Concluding remarks

In response to calls for greater attention to the contextual characteristics of metaphor in mental health discourse, this paper has examined the nature and relevance of metaphor in conceptualizing the notion of control in trauma talk. The key contextual characteristic of interest has been the nature of trauma (i.e., the primacy of concrete physical experiences) and its influence on metaphor use outlined in terms of four specific discursive patterns. As we have been limited to discussing the singular theme of control within a general discourse analytic framework combined with conceptual metaphor theory, we hope that future work can complement the present study both empirically and methodologically. For example, one subject described her earthquake experience as “being in the dark” – an expression which is relatable not only to the theme of control, but to that of knowledge and understanding. It would also be worthwhile to investigate the issues raised in this paper in the context of actual psychotherapy sessions

for PTSD. In terms of methodology, the interactional “scaffolding” quality of metaphor highlighted in this paper can be analyzed from alternative perspectives, among which conversation analysis may be most promising for its nuanced focus on the interactional structure of talk in general, and psychotherapy in particular (Peräkylä et al. 2011).

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Bionotes

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