Academic Paper

The role of metaphor in coaching when re-authoring narratives in post-traumatic growth: a thematic analysis

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Abstract

In this exploratory study we aim to understand whether metaphor plays a role in re-authoring narratives when coachees are experiencing process posttraumatic growth (PTG). Recognising the post-trauma phase of their life, nine participants who utilised the modality of coaching whilst in trauma recovery were interviewed using semi-structured questions, the data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Four key themes emerged from the results indicating metaphor usage is a common factor in re-authoring post-trauma: awareness of past-trauma and a need for reauthoring; an expression for change; the PTG framework created a coherent narrative of PTG in the present; and both coaching and metaphor created a coherent narrative of self and life in the present.

Introduction

According to the WHO World Mental Health Surveys (Benjet, 2016; Kessler, 2017) the prevalence of trauma across world populations is estimated at 70% for one or more traumas in a lifetime. For the purpose of this study, trauma is described according to Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku and Calhoun (2018), as the collapsing or shattering of the assumptive world or core beliefs. The American Psychological Association (APA) define trauma as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster" (APA, 2021) and with common mental health issues including depression and anxiety occurring in one in six adults in the UK (McManus et al., 2009) it is likely that those seeking coaching may have pre-existing trauma histories. Posttraumatic growth (PTG), first coined in the 1990s by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), describes the phenomenon of, often, spontaneous growth in the aftermath of trauma or extremely stressful life

events. Their research demonstrates how, post-trauma, certain individuals experience marked growth which cannot be characterised as resilience, return to baseline or former functioning (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014b).

Cooper-Dickinson, Kampman and Papworth's (2022) research into the role of coaching and PTG highlights the need for trauma awareness and training for coaches, and acknowledges the benefits for individuals who may have a desire for change, self-improvement, to overcome difficulties through coaching. However, Tehrani, Osborne and Lane (2012) suggest desire for change may be hindered by trauma-related histories and therefore impede progress. Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck (2018) suggest that developmental coaching is a structured, focused and supportive intervention helping individuals to grow, change and achieve outcomes. Similarly, Spence and Joseph (2016) note that coaching is often sought by individuals during or after challenging life experiences. They also believe that there is a need for research into coaching and PTG as trauma is regularly present in the coaching space at executive level. It is within Joseph's (2018) THRIVE coaching model that the process of reauthoring is proposed.

In the field of PTG, Hall (2015) and Spence & Joseph (2016) recognise metaphor as a tool for reauthoring narratives, and the Metaphor Magic Box (Seto & Geithner, 2018) addresses metaphor as a creative coaching tool with potential for exploring and gaining insight within coaching. In positive psychology coaching research, Beadle and Papworth (2023) use metaphor as an embodied intervention for insight and change. This study aims to explore the role of metaphor, for individuals seeking coaching to reauthor their life after trauma.

Literature Review

The purpose of this research is not to explore the role of coaching for trauma, but recognise its presence in an individual's history, and that whilst growth may not occur during trauma itself, it can occur in the aftermath (Tedeschi et al. 2018). The existential realities faced by those on the other side of trauma, may mean they seek coaching towards positive outcomes (Spence & Joseph, 2016), a phenomenon known as PTG. PTG research demonstrates that not all individuals who experience trauma develop psychopathologies, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or posttraumatic stress (PTS) but can display symptoms of distress (Janoff-Bulman, 2014; Joseph, 2018; Saakvitne, Tennen & Affleck, 1998). Joseph (2018) suggests however that these symptoms of distress can and do emerge during coaching.

Tedeschi et al (2018) described the phenomenon of growth in the aftermath of stressful life events, or traumas as PTG, and suggested the experience of growth cannot be classed as resilience, nor as a return to former functioning (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014b). Joseph & Linley (2006) recognised the perceived positive change as 'adversarial growth' and Janoff-Bulman's (2004) 'shattered assumptions theory' acknowledges that after traumatic events there is a sense of rebuilding oneself. The phenomenon of 'rebuilding' is not a given for all those who experience trauma, nor is the desire, nor the will to grow in some individuals. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014b) recognise that PTG develops across five domains; working with personal strengths, developing new possibilities, appreciation of life, building positive relationships with others and spiritual change.

Research is beginning to highlight the benefits of coaching as an intervention for facilitating PTG; Cooper-Dickson, Kampman and Papworth's (2023) research on exploring the experiences of coaches working with PTG recognise the complexities of life, ethics and safeguarding when navigating trauma narratives in coaching. Their study suggests that coaching offers a safe space for moving on with life, and that storytelling and reauthoring are part of that process. Being trauma-informed and trained offers a level of understanding of what trauma is. However, Cooper-Dickson et al. (2023) note the complexity of the coaching-counselling boundary, and ask where does one stop and the other start? (Williams, 2003; Bluckert, 2005).

Calhoun and Tedeschi, (2014a) suggest that PTG occurs in the presence of an 'expert companion', a person who can hold an unconditional positive regard towards the individual and the existence of trauma. This companion can facilitate re-authoring, shifting an individual from unhealthy rumination, towards potential, learning, growth, and strengths (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014b). Third Generation Coaching (Stelter, 2018), acknowledges that the coach acts as a dialogue partner to foster a reflective process, helping construct personal meaning and 'self-formation'. Constructing meaning sits within the five domains of PTG, characterised by positive reinterpretation, towards PTG outcomes and realisation of transformation (Tedeschi et al., 2018). According to Drake (2017) narrative coaching explores the transition from 'Search,' where the coachee clarifies their objectives, to 'Shift,' the reintegration of a new narrative. Here the coach plays a pivotal role encouraging self-reflection and change.

The concept of re-authoring involves "the construction of new personal narratives, that include past events, and building new networks of beliefs about self, others and the world" (Joseph, 2018: 9). Individuals can begin to construct, or craft personal narratives, creating meaning across three dimensions: personal, interpersonal, and social or cultural (Neimeyer, 2014). *The Hero's Journey* (Campbell, 2003) is a narrative metaphor, which acknowledges the journey through adversity, transformation, and change. It has formed the backbone of literature and film; a coherent account of self-experience (Roos & Neimeyer, 2007). Metaphor is also useful in meaning-making within grief therapy, where an understanding of metaphor, function and nature is important (Tay & Neimeyer, 2021). These themes of coaching, metaphor, and reauthoring for change are the framework for this research.

Metaphor and re-authoring experience

Coaches sometimes explore and use metaphors to support individuals to find symbolic language for experiences which are difficult to express verbally (Hall, 2015; Meichenbaum, 2014; Spence & Joseph, 2016) and the use of metaphor is regularly cited as an avenue into reauthoring in the PTG and coaching literature (Hall, 2015; Spence & Joseph, 2016). In therapy, metaphors are utilised to navigate difficult concepts (Barker, 2013; Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda & Lillis, 2006; Levitt, Korman & Angus, 2010), or in the case of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, 2019) to create parallel narratives for understanding complex or painful events, and Milton Erickson's use of metaphor (Rosen, 2010) is one of the foundations of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) (Dilts, 1990). Seto and Geithner (2018) developed Metaphor Magic Box for working with coaching clients to explore thinking, and Beadle and Papworth (2023) researched developing a new positive psychology coaching intervention using metaphor for transformation and insight.

Spence and Joseph (2016) use an acorn metaphor to illustrate the actualizing tendency in humanistic psychology, while Hall (2015) employs the metaphor of a lotus growing in mud to symbolise human struggle and growth. Aristotle said that metaphors help to describe the indescribable (Kirby, 1997) and Lakoff and Johnson (2003) similarly confirm that metaphors act as tools for expressing the intricacies of lived experiences. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Fetterman, Bair, Weth, Landkammer & Robinson, 2016), provides grounding for non-tangible concepts and is used when literal language is insufficient to describe an experience. It remains unclear though how metaphors manifest, how they are introduced, and what function they serve in re-authoring narratives in coaching.

According to Fainsilber and Ortony (1987, p.247) metaphors facilitate the ability to describe an emotionally charged event, which may be 'difficult or impossible to convey' without the use of metaphors. Neuroimaging also highlights how figurative language and metaphor impacts the centres of the brain associated with emotion (Citron, Cacciari, Funcke, Hsu & Jacobs, 2019); instead of inquiring about how something feels directly, coaches may find that employing metaphor fosters a safe environment where a multidimensional realm of thoughts, emotions, and feelings can

coexist without the need for explicit explanation. Metaphor may give language to something intangible, in more concrete terms, or make it more easily perceived (Fetterman et al., 2016). Tay (2017) describes these as conceptual metaphors such as a 'brick in the chest' or 'knot in the stomach', used to simplify a complex experience.

Implicit metaphors are often more noticeable in spoken language as there is greater scope for interpretation and explanation on behalf of the speaker (Ricoeur, 1974). The individual speaks about conceptual terms, such as life or stress, in more concrete terms such as a journey, or a weight, or the breaking of something, such as a heart (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Lawley and Tompkins (2000) suggested that simply asking about metaphors can elicit further metaphors and exploration through use of symbolic language.

It is unclear from the literature how metaphors arise in conversations and how they function in reauthoring after trauma. However, Fetterman et al., (2016) have created the Metaphor Usage Measure, to assess the difference between more literal thinkers and those who are metaphoric.

When individuals dissociate from a trauma (Van der Kolk, 2015), using metaphors could facilitate detached discussions by allowing for 'safe space' for narrative creation (Seligman & Kirmayer, 2008). Smith (2008) emphasises how metaphors may determine how we feel about events, and the process of constructing, deconstructing, or reconstructing a narrative has the potential to alter negative perceptions of a trauma and re-establish resilience or encourage a transformed state (Neimeyer, 2014). However, research in this area is lacking.

The process of facilitating individuals to re-author their highly stressful life event through the exploration of their metaphors could potentially support them in creating a new assumptive world or core belief that incorporates the trauma (Pals & McAdams, 2004). The aim of this research is to understand re-authoring narratives and the role metaphor plays in this process. It specifically focusses upon the following questions:

- What role does metaphor play when reauthoring after trauma with individuals seeking coaching?
- How do the metaphors appear?
- How is metaphor used to facilitate reauthoring; before, during and/or after coaching?
- How do participants consider metaphor as a useful tool (or not) in coaching for facilitating PTG?

Methodology

The research explores the potential significance of the use of metaphors during coaching for PTG with individuals who have experienced a highly stressful life event (based on Tedeschi et al's (2018) description and terminology for a life trauma). Coaching is placed within the constructivist and interpretivist traditions of the social sciences (Oades, Siokou & Slemp, 2019). It is characterised as an action-oriented, collaborative process aimed at facilitating goal attainment, self-directed learning, and/or enhancing performance in the coachee's personal or professional life. Neimeyer (2006) proposes that reauthoring is a constructivist process for creating, or crafting personal narratives.

Semi-structured interviews (between 27-81 minutes) were conducted to explore the use of metaphor in coaching for PTG; do metaphors manifest, how are they facilitated, and what is their role in the coaching process? Dilts' (1990) Logical Levels of Change framework was used to structure the interview questions across various domains: environment, learning/capabilities, beliefs and values, identity, and purpose.

Participants

The research received approval from the University of East London, School of Psychology's Ethics Committee, and all potential participants provided written consent. Eight to ten participants meeting specific criteria were identified: they had sought coaching for personal development; had a history of trauma; were over 18 years old; and were willing to complete the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI 96) to assess potential growth. Exclusion criteria included; not having a current PTSD diagnosis or undergoing psychotherapy simultaneously with coaching. This was considered important to navigate the possibility that an individual was not in the growth phase, post trauma.

Coaches who had worked with clients who met this criteria were contacted via ICF and EMCC Global network databases; and the University of East London (UEL) Master's in Applied Positive Psychology & Coaching Psychology (MAPPCP) student forum; LinkedIn and Facebook were also used to publicise the research. The coaches highlighted the research to possible participants (Coachees), and each potential participant received an information pack which included an explanation of the terms (PTG, metaphors and re-authoring), an outline interview schedule, interview questions and request to complete a PTG-Inventory. Purposive sampling (Oades, Siokou & Slemp, 2019) was utilised to identify participants demonstrating PTG by using the PTG-Inventory (PTGI 96) created by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996). This is a self-assessment measure used to ascertain if PTG is experienced across one or more domains. According to Tedeschi et al., (2018), if the PTGI demonstrates change across one domain then, this should be regarded as evidence of growth; upon expressing interest, participants were asked to complete the PTGI 96; 9 participants were recruited post PTGI 96.

Due to discussing a potentially sensitive topic, and to ensure participant well-being, an optional R.A.I.N guided meditation was offered at the end of the interview, This was adapted from True Refuge by Tara Brach (2012). R.A.I.N stands for Recognize what is going on; Allow the experience to be there, just as it is; Investigate with interest and care; Nurture with self-compassion. Post-interview letters were sent to all participants informing them of their ability to withdraw from the study up to the last day of the third week following the interview date, and additional supporting information about appropriate mental-health services; Samaritans, Mind.org, and Assist Ireland were given.

Data Collection

Participants' interviews ranged from 27 to 81 minutes (Table 1). In-person interviews were not conducted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The first author assigned participants unique alphanumeric code to maintain anonymity, transcripts were downloaded, manually cleaned of identifying features and translation errors using Microsoft Word and shared with the second author.

The interview included deepening questions. This approach, recommended by Qu & Dumay (2011), aims to allow participants to respond to, expand upon and explore their previous answers. This also allowed them to decline responses, if necessary, due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter.

Table 1: Interview questions

1. Can you explain how you described your highly stressful life event before your experienced growth?(How would you have described it?)
a. Did you use any symbols, visual descriptions, objects, drawings, figurative language, or descriptions? (Were there any particular ones you used to describe it?)
b. Are you aware why you chose to describe it in this way? (Can you explain?)
c. Did this help with the description?(and in what way)
2. As you progressed with your coaching did you notice any changes to your description? (How did your description start to change?)
a. Did this change how you felt about the past event? (In what way?)
b. Would you say this contributed to the growth you experienced? (If so, how?)
3. What would you say began the progress of growth?
a. Do you feel this was a re-authoring process? (now that you know what reauthoring is)
4. How did your story about what happened change?
a. Did you use new symbols, visual descriptions, objects, drawings, or metaphors to describe this change? (Can you give an example?)
5. In what way has the PTG you experienced altered you or the way you live your life?
a. Has it changed where you live or your physical environment in any way
b. Do you do things differently now?
c. Have you learned anything?
d. Have your beliefs or values changed?
e. Has it changed your sense of who you are?
f. Has it changed your, or given you a new, purpose? (Can you give examples?)
6. What metaphor do you, or would you, use to describe your experience of your life now?
a. Do you have a current metaphor to describe your experience of growth? (What might that be?)
b. If not, are you able to think of one now?
7. Do you feel using metaphors is a useful way to describe or explain something such as a highly stressful life event? In what way have they not been useful? (Can you give examples?)
8. Would you say that your experience of coaching contributed to your growth? (In what way?)

Data analysis

Constructivism emphasises the researcher's biases and the necessity for reflexivity (Oades, Siokou & Slemp, 2019). The first author maintained a reflexive diary to check assumptions and bias (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and engaged in regular supervision with the second author given that the first author, an accredited coach, conducted the interviews and interpreted the data, it was crucial to acknowledge their potential influence on outcomes. The first author analysed the data, involving transcription, anonymization, and coding, and then utilised an inductive thematic analysis, following the six-phase qualitative reflexive/organic approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (Terry, Hayfield, Braun & Clarke, 2017). The emergence of common patterns and themes from the data, were sense checked collaboratively with the second author.

Findings

The initial coding identified two themes relating to the role of metaphor in coaching and or PTG; Reflection IN coaching (facilitating change) and Reflections ON coaching (creating a coherent narrative). Each theme has two further sub-themes (Table 2).

Table 2: Master Themes and Subordinate Themes and Prevalence

Reflection IN coaching - facilitating change	Awareness of past-trauma and need for reauthoring	Metaphor - communicating the complex	8
		Ownership of past story and reauthoring	9
	Expression of change	Meaning Making	9
		Metaphors of change	9
		Noticing difference of lived experience	9
		PTG as a Journey	9
Reflection ON coaching - creating a coherent narrative	PTG framework created a coherent narrative of PTG in the present	Redefined Purpose	9
		Noticing Strengths	9
		Presence of Spirituality	5
		Knowing Thyself	9
		Changes to relationships	8
	Coaching and metaphor created a coherent narrative of self and life in the present	Narrative of the self	9
		Narrative of present life	9

Reflection IN coaching - facilitating change

Reflection IN Coaching represented the participants' awareness of what they discussed in their coaching session. Particular emphasis was given to how they described their trauma, their need and desire for change, and the role of metaphor in the coaching sessions.

Awareness of past-trauma and need for reauthoring

Use of Metaphor - communicating the complex

Metaphor was evident in descriptions of past experience and trauma. Eight participants used metaphor in their coaching sessions to give language to complex experiences and to create shared understanding with the coach.

> 'Yeah, yeah, like I was saying at the beginning, definitely, it's really useful because it's very hard to translate emotions into language without metaphor.'

> 'I could have lived with the blue pill, the blue pill, in reference to, uh, what is the movie? The Matrix.'

> 'I realised that, you know, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place'

> 'I think a bolt out of the blue definitely, it was a big shock'.

> 'and it always reminds me of The Wizard of Oz with the Wicked Witch of the West when she's like I'm melting,'

> 'there were stages where I was completely out of control and not capable of observing what was going on and yeah, so as a rollercoaster was I was, I was on it, I was on it, I was not in control.'

Ownership of past story and reauthoring

Prior to coaching there was an awareness of the need for change from their life pre-trauma. All 9 participants, having already received therapeutic support, felt that coaching was the next step in their journey of growth. They believed they were in place to move forward, not backwards; whilst at the same time understanding the need to explore the changes that had occurred in them post-trauma. Coaching was a means to reauthor who they are now, using metaphor, and facilitated taking ownership of both their past and trauma narrative.

'Yeah, first of all, the awareness that something was off, something was wrong, it wasn't working too and a desire to have it change.'

'It didn't get the same feeling, it was uncomfortable, and it needed, I wanted to change.'

'The past became less important, and again, it was less about what had been done to me and more about how well I was doing, what I'd accomplished and then planning for the future.'

'OK, so I suppose certain things, like you know, I suppose taking ownership, and, and you know making plans then, to actually, you know, formalise, eh, certain things, or regularise certain things'.

Expression of change

Participants characterised coaching as a change process; they experienced a range of changes, including shifts in their sense of purpose, goals, beliefs, and values. Moreover, they became aware of how their lives and relationships were fundamentally transformed following trauma and change emerged as a central element in both the coaching process and the journey of PTG.

Meaning Making

Coaching provided a space for meaning making. This facilitated an awareness of goals, purpose, the significance of relationships and changes to their physical world. The process of change appears to be significant according to the transcripts of all participants as it was a measure of growth and the ability to let go of the trauma.

> 'but then when I came back my whole life changed because that's when I saw that it actually did something because I totally changed my behaviour'

> 'Of course, change, everything changed and my personality change and my, my routine changed my, my work change, my goals change, my opinion change, my relation with people change, my, my communication change, everything is changing, every.'

> 'For me it was about, it was about moving forward so 100%.'

All nine participants expressed a desire for change. They recounted their previous experiences, sought answers through self-help literature, social media, and therapy, and the concept of embarking on the journey of 'letting go' was a crucial aspect of what they now understood to be their PTG journey.

Metaphors of Change

Specific words appeared across the transcripts that related to change such as shifts, clicks, reshaping, rebuilding and remodelling. These metaphors were used as descriptions of how change was occurring during the coaching as participants reauthored their trauma story, moving towards constructive rumination and PTG.

> 'No, we have, yeah, often we have a person who is just sitting and listening to you and just telling account and similar small things and I don't know just something clicked.'

> 'it's an ice sculpture rather than a granite sculpture, so you chip away, you find the structure, then you melt it, refreeze it, chip away again'

> 'It's all that feedback loop I think, if you don't have the skills you don't know what you need to unlock it'.

'I keep saying I have new destinations. I have new tracks. I'm building tracks.'

Noticing difference of lived experience

Differences in lived experience were noted in their physical world, behaviour and relationships. This related to the use of Dilts's (1990) Logical Levels of change and questions relating to changes to the home environment, learning, values and purpose.

'I can be present, but I, I can actually dream and have hope again without it being unrealistic.'

'Well, actually we bought a new house'

'God, I do loads of stuff, I do loads of stuff if I want to do (laughs), which that I wouldn't have been allowed to do before. So, going back to, I do fine boat rowing and like the painting and [expletive] and actually my job,'

'The story changed in that, and mm, in a, this is interesting in that I, yeah, as a participant in my own story versus being on a rollercoaster and being and I wasn't quite sure whose story was that I was just on this story, it gave me the ability to choose'

PTG as a Journey

The notion of a 'journey' was core to participants and was concerned with moving from trauma to growth. Growth was described as a journey by over half the participants and in other terms, such as a story, by others. The idea of the Hero's journey is synonymous with PTG in process.

'So, it was a combination of reading a lot of books, self-help books, listening to shows, going to therapy, and that broadened, you know, kind of started this journey of confirming that, yes, I was on a rollercoaster.'

'Yeah, so it was more of a kind of a journey, I was just, you know, yeah, I guess to, to expand on the metaphor.'

'So, I think, again getting back to my point about the reauthoring and posttraumatic growth is a journey, like it's continuing to evolve so that, that came out of that,'

'So yes, I think so, I think the whole family has been on a journey of, of growing as a result of the hunger for me to find an answer out there.'

Journey was associated with; the process of PTG, using metaphors for expression and reauthoring, and the coach fulfilling the role of 'expert companion' within the reflective space of coaching, and moving them towards growth.

Reflection ON coaching - creating a coherent narrative (Table 2)

Reflections ON coaching notes a metacognitive awareness, facilitated by the interview; as participants described the outcomes of their coaching they became increasingly aware of both their PTG, their metaphors and how the coaching had facilitated the creation of a new narrative of who they were and how they now lived and experienced their present life. In some cases, the PTG was not recognised until reflecting upon this in the interview itself. One participant described the interview as like 'a mini-therapy session' and really helpful for reflection on their progress.

Coaching as a process was described by all as supportive in developing greater understanding of themselves and others, as well as recognising strengths and changing feelings; recognising strength is a domain of PTG. Metaphors were used when asked to symbolise the ways in which

they had changed and the current narrative of Self. Coaches' skills at helping change perspectives was also mentioned.

PTG framework created a coherent narrative of PTG in the present

On reflection, during the interview, participants recognised, when answering the interview questions, how, retrospectively the process of coaching helped to shift the focus from the past, (prior to attending coaching), to the future; reframing language, changing patterns of behaviour, and moving the them forward in the process of growth (PTG). Their new understanding of PTG domains elicited this language when describing the impact of coaching.

Redefined Purpose

'I think I've become much more authentic because I am so much more aware of my values. We become more conscious; I would say.'

'I think before I had her [daughter] I would have said my purpose was to, I was one of these people who said, yeah, having children isn't going to change my life, I would have said that. And now I'm like my life is about my children.'

'No, it's awakened me to the purpose that I have. Yeah.'

'No, I think they just kind of, maybe, brought them [beliefs & values] back to, to life again, rather than, they're not hiding under a bushel anymore. And I'm more confident in saying them.'

Noticing Strengths

'OK, well I'm definitely stronger.'

'Yeah, yeah so, equipped, I would say like, I felt I feel more equipped. Definitely feel more equipped and there's lots of factors why. I don't have any fear.'

'Yeah, of course, and became more brave.'

Participants described the present in terms of new boundaries and ownership, of having greater choice and new or changed interest in spirituality, as well as engaging in new activities and finding new purpose.

Presence of Spirituality

'I've experienced spiritual growth'

'Uh, so the belief, you know, I'm not particularly religious. So, I wouldn't say that had changed. I'm probably become a little bit more curious to another power, higher power, uhm.'

Thriving Self

'I think it changed me and it contributed to the story because it became about taking control, being powerful, learning more.'

'I feel like everyone will tell you this, I savour every day. It's wonderful to be able to, to be alive and even in the [expletive] days, it's like, this is still better than, like a bad day doing this is still better than what it was like before.'

'So, I felt like that was my way of turning stones to find out ways we could cope and grow and survive and thrive, yeah.'

Changes to relationships

'So, my, my relationship with my children just, I became such a better parent.'

'I'd like to think that I have more compassion'

'And I spend a lot of time talking to my family about, you know self-awareness, who we are, how we are looking at things'

There was recognition across participants of how they had grown, becoming self-aware, experiencing gratitude, began to thrive and being aware of their values, all aspects of the domains of PTG.

Coaching and metaphor created a coherent narrative of self and life in the present

The reflective nature of the interview brought forward metaphors for their present life and sense of identity. Not only were these consciously expressed by the participants, but they were also found in the transcripts as natural and unconscious use of metaphor in language. Coachees also described the use of metaphors as beneficial and the coaching itself as an integral part of their personal growth and PTG.

Narrative of self

Descriptions in the present moment from the lens of PTG as a reflection of their awareness of the outcome of coaching and PTG.

'Ah, much more reflective while being able to say you know I am, instead of being so focused in my own little universe, you know my map is bigger.'

'But yeah, I would say I'm definitely stepping more into my power.'

'Oh, I think you totally, totally 100% because without that I would have been stuck. I wouldn't have had the ability to see or change the pattern.'

Narrative of experience

The reflection on coaching emphasised the benefits of coaching and the use of metaphor for trauma and PTG. It also reinforced the awareness of those benefits whilst reflecting on their present life.

'So, in the movie The Matrix there is a there's a final scene where, there's total awareness and he pauses, he doesn't run anymore from whatever, he stops and he, he can see and, he comes to, he awakens and for me, that's what this journey has done and continues to do.'

'I've got a second chance here, and so her words, plus having [coaches name] help me to unlock some of what I probably have never really used, have utilised, has definitely helped that journey.'

'Oh, I think you totally, totally 100% because without that [coaching] I would have been stuck. I wouldn't have had the ability to see or change the pattern.'

'I would definitely say that the coaching, enabled to me to kind of move forward in a gentle way or you know, I think that definitely around the reauthoring part.'

'Because it did take me to, then do the coaching, and respond to it and then keep on doing this so, so it's kind of the bow on the gift, so yeah.'

'Yeah, yeah, like I was saying at the beginning, definitely, it's really useful because it's very hard to translate emotions into language without metaphor.'

'It's helped me explain and understand, and also explain, and explain to myself, because as I say it, it comes back to my ears so understanding. … it's, it was it, it is the ultimate gift because, because maybe it's what got me off the rollercoaster to begin with, right?'

Participants who used metaphors described them as useful for explaining things to others and for creating shared meaning as part of their journey towards growth. There were concerns that assumptions could be made about the meaning of a metaphor which could lead to misunderstanding and how negative metaphors could dominate expression at the time of a trauma.

'No, actually I don't think I can, except sometimes I think it might be, it's easier to access negative metaphors sometimes, so that, that was, that would be the only thing.'

'If you're using a metaphor that actually for them doesn't have that impact, there be like or it doesn't sound as bad'

Metaphor and figurative language use varied across nominal (noun) and predicate (verb) metaphors which were often more prevalent in descriptive language, when participants were unaware of their usage, 'found that hardest because it was like banging my head off a wall'.

All participants felt that coaching was a key contributing factor to their sense of personal growth and a necessary stage of their journey of moving away from the trauma towards PTG, based on their PTGI results. They were adamant that coaching contributed to their experience of PTG and those who had used, and were aware of metaphors felt they gave language to experiences which were difficult to explain to others.

Discussion

This exploratory study aimed to understand the role metaphor plays in re-authoring narratives when coachees are experiencing process posttraumatic growth (PTG). Coaches appeared to hold space for metaphor, some explored the metaphors with them, and all, bar one participant indicated, it was through reflection in the interview, that they became aware of how unconscious use of metaphorical language had existed throughout the coaching process. Metaphor was used as part of reauthoring within the coaching sessions, and interestingly was a significant part of the reflective process during the interviews. Lakoff & Johnson (2003) in their book *Metaphors we live by,* discuss the pervasiveness of conceptual metaphors in everyday language; people use them unconsciously as a fundamental part of everyday conversation (Cameron, 2008). Whilst one participant did not recognise the usefulness of metaphor in coaching, they used them unconsciously, in their answers throughout the interview process.

The two overarching themes were created in response to an interesting observation about the interviews themselves; one aspect of participants' reflection *on* the coaching, which would be considered a normal response to interview questions. However, the second theme was generated in response to the fact that the interviews themselves elicited a reflective space, where additional observations on PTG and metaphor arose, almost akin to Double-loop Learning (Cartwright, 2002). This was an unexpected finding and proposes the benefit of *review* sessions with coachees to deepen and aid reflection *in* and *on* their sessions;

Even those who initially wondered if they had simply returned to 'baseline' became aware through the interview and PTGI that they had indeed experienced PTG, specifically when asked the questions related to Dilts' Logical Levels (1990), this further highlights Schon's (1983) reflection on-

action reference to integrating new information; 'a-ha' moments associated with environmental changes, with sudden recognition of relocating, redecorating, or making their home more 'cosy' while in process PTG. And further questions triggered renewed awareness of reauthoring with comments reflecting, returning to education, recognition of values, belief changes, 'no longer a victim', feeling like a 'different person' and finding or realising an unrealised purpose, 'it's enabled me to do[sic] is to unlock a lot of me that was there before and just, acknowledge that the parts of me that I thought were broken, aren't broken'. 'No, it's awakened me to the purpose that I have.'

PTG was evident as an unconscious process, using Freud's description of unconscious (Bernet, 2002), as that which is unknown to an individual; participants' language followed the PTG framework, even with limited knowledge of PTG, other than the information pack and PTGI. Few would have known the domains of PTG and yet they outlined becoming conscious of growth related to personal strengths (wiser), relating to others, (better parents), new possibilities (returning to learning), appreciation of life (feeling greater compassion for others and savouring experiences), and spiritual changes (having a 'spiritual practice' and starting to meditate). The researcher's reflexivity, as part of the thematic analysis process, and knowledge of PTG made it identifiable in the transcripts, even when the participant did not. This creates an argument towards coach development and knowledge in the field of PTG, to recognise the language and bring it to consciousness as a form of feedback to clients to create space for reflection on the significance of these experiences, this links to Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence framework in building self-awareness and self-management in the coachee.

When asked, most said that the process of change had been a reauthoring one, having had it explained to them both prior to, and during the interview. Although some said they did not want to rewrite the past or felt it was not possible, they did relate how they did things differently now, felt differently about the past event, or recognised that they were currently more in control in their lives when it came to their choices, relationships, and work. This aligns with the process of constructive rumination (Tedeschi et al., 2018) which facilitates reframing of events which, even when not explicitly expressed, was evident in participants' language. Asking reflective questions has the potential to stimulate constructive rumination as an individual creates a coherent narrative of self and experience (Neimeyer, 2014). Constructive rumination can be facilitated in coaching by a coach who is trauma-informed, as not everyone who suffers a trauma will experience PTG (Tedeschi et al. 2018).

PTG was evident in explicit language, but also implicitly in the metaphors which Lakeoff and Johnson (1980a) suggest as a metaphorical lens of embodied language. This shapes human experience, perceptions, consequent actions and gives the articulation of complexity. It is inherent in the everyday use of language; references to nominal metaphors, such as *butterflies*, *flowers*, *puzzles*, *rocks*, *'fearlessness'* and *'brave'* and predicate metaphors of *blooming*, '*joyful parenting*' and *'galvanised'*, were all metaphorical and related to specific domains of PTG. The Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1961) asserts that individuals can be unaware of aspects of themselves, in this case, growth, without others to illuminate this awareness. Some participants portrayed themselves through the eyes of friends, having '*reinvented*' themselves, and how coaches facilitated acknowledgement of previously unrecognised strengths. Meichenbaum (2006), explains how metaphors are used to reappraise trauma, and the subsequent story told about the trauma, as a coping mechanism.

CMT (Fetterman et al., 2016) states that it can be difficult to describe something that is intangible, such as an experience or feeling, and therefore we regularly turn to metaphor to give language to these concepts; Siegelman (1993) recognises the importance of metaphor in bridging thoughts, feelings, insight, symbols and language that coexist simultaneously. Metaphors may not even have to be a conscious undertaking; despite the lack of metaphor use with one participant, whose first language was not English, there was unconscious use of metaphors in their interview. This participant used a vocal metaphor, when considering metaphor as figurative use of language, 'phht' to describe how their life had become simple and nominal metaphors, the use of a noun

metaphorically, of 'brave' and 'rude' to describe identity change and alteration in how they related to others since PTG.

According to Gioia et al. (1994), ascribing meaning to an event or experience is enhanced by the use of symbolism or metaphor. This can also be necessary to conceal difficulties and emphasise the more beneficial ones. Symbolism and sensemaking are key components of strategic action (Gioia et al., 1994), changes to the environment such as redecorating and moving houses are evidence of symbolic strategic action by the participants. Such concrete changes are a more accessible way of measuring PTG in a coachee and may be an important marker for a coach to ensure that a coachee is not experiencing illusory PTG (Zoellner & Maercker, 2016) and simply describing positive changes to both appear like they are experiencing improvements and to convince themselves that they have. Arguably, metaphors may simply be a natural part of communication when explaining difficult events and not necessarily a catalyst for PTG. PTG may be what stimulates the narration of experience and not the metaphors themselves, although this research indicated (8 out of 9 participants) metaphors were useful in the process of coaching.

PTG in coaching highlighted the need on the part of the coachee to change their perception of *Self* as part of their growth. Based on Fletcher (2007) research suggested that the unconscious ability of metaphor to transform insight into the *self* and creates the opportunity for possible 'future selves', in effect a re-authoring of identity. There may also be a desire to influence the coach's perception and, in this context, the researcher's, to fulfil a sense of socially desirable responding (Paulhus, 1984). Having a coherent identity after a trauma aligns with Bush, Ozkan and Passmore (2013)'s assumption that at the point of an ending or a beginning we have a desire to either 'change something about the way we see ourselves or change the way others perceive us' (pp.60).

When working with metaphor, participants expressed fears that metaphors may not explain the gravity of an experience, or be open to misunderstanding; the ease of accessing negative metaphors might need navigating, or further qualification to express the explicit meaning. Metaphors either need to evolve or be replaced to elicit growth experiences or awareness of growth to be helpful. It seems that it may be more important that the coachee understands their own symbolism, growth and change, but not necessarily the coach (Spinelli, Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010, p.100). Coaches need the ability to recognise types of metaphors and support a coachee in developing their unique metaphor, rather than making assumptions about what it might mean; Cushion (2018), states that it is important that reflection does not become a 'tool for control and discursive domination'.

The extensive appearance of metaphors within the interviews emphasises how commonly they are used and how an understanding of metaphors (Smith, 2008) has the ability to challenge or explore the rich inner landscape of the coachee in re-mapping an experience, perception of identity or reauthor trauma. This seems to reinforce the concept that metaphor has the power in shaping evolution of a person's identity; two approaches commonly utilised when working with metaphors in coaching are Clean Language and Symbolic Modelling (Sullivan & Rees, 2008). Neutral questions seek to explore the client's perspective; designed to artfully avoid consciously or unconsciously polluting the metaphorical landscape of the coachee and retain original embodied meaning.

Coaching was perceived as beneficial by all participants and a necessary part of their PTG journey. Coaching occurred at a specific point when attention had moved to new possibilities, changes in perspective, recognising the need for change and shifting from rumination to narrative development (Tedeschi et al., 2018). The ability of the coach to '*see things they could not*', helped reauthoring, elaborated as, '*shifts*', '*unlocking*' and '*something clicked*'. Feeding back observations is arguably the inherent skill in the role of the coach, however the relevance of metaphors and symbolic language when reauthoring trauma, may indicate a need for specific training in how to work in the symbolic realm and PTG. If a coach feels that PTG is present in metaphor, or if a metaphor may be a means to encourage PTG, it is important that they understand when PTG may not be present, or

necessary, and be able to distinguish between resilience, PTG, and the necessary condition of the shattering of the assumptive world for PTG to occur (Tedeschi et al., 2018).

This research sought to understand if metaphor had a role in coaching for PTG. It can also be argued that an 'expert companion' Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014a) role of the coach can create a non-judgemental space for constructive rumination which facilitates a natural progression in development based on Kegan's Constructive Developmental Theory (Kegan, 1982). According to Spence and Joseph (2016), the THRIVE model is a useful starting position for coaching in the aftermath of trauma with re-authoring a key step in the construction of a new personal narrative. The expert companion role appears to be necessary in supporting coachees when it comes to changes in rumination (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014a) and many individuals who experience trauma often turn to coaching at that stage of their journey (Spence & Joseph, 2016). The shift from subject, being overwhelmed by the trauma, to object, having agency over self and experience, may be part of the shift from self-authoring mind to self-transforming mind which is the fifth stage of constructive development (Rant, 2021).

The role of the coach may be to help a coachee identify developmental needs in the aftermath of trauma, as part of the development of the *self*; connecting with strengths, purpose and meaning towards a new way of being. This is inherent in the re-authoring, and the use of metaphor can be a powerful tool; Kok et al., (2011) indicate that metaphor can assist clients gaining insight, but also activates parts of the brain associated with insight (Yu, et al. 2019). Change and growth are common aspects of coaching, but an interesting finding in this research was the interviews themselves created a space for reflection and this highlights the role of coaching as a space for narrative creation, being with the client and for the client in the process of meaning making (Spinelli et al., 2010, p.100) and further developed the re-authoring in PTG

Limitations

This research was a small exploratory study as part of an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology. Defining the parameters of coach-specific training and methodological approaches to coaching would have elicited further information and established greater insight into the specific use of metaphors, their exploration within the coaching sessions and whether they were explicitly using metaphor and symbolism. Future research would consider interviewing specific trauma-informed coaches with working knowledge of PTG and metaphor. Interviewing clients of coaches without a pre-existing relationship to the first author would address the issue of bias in the data analysis relating to social desirability and impression management (Paulhus, 1984). Awareness of affirmative bias was raised where participants may have been encouraged to answer in the affirmative to please both the researcher and others involved in the sampling process. Post interviews, it was noted that the closed nature of some questions elicited a greater need for deepening questions with some interviewees, although all were willing to respond to questions asked. An updated version of the questions is available with more open ended questions.

The use of metaphors in reauthoring PTG without coaching was not addressed. Questions were not asked about other expert companions or the importance of other processes such as therapy in the experience of PTG. Having used MS Teams for the interviews the potential for observing physical metaphors was also denied. MS Teams may also have created obstacles depending on the participants comfort level using an online platform. To make the study more replicable a specific design for coaching with metaphors and coaching without metaphors could be used. Also, it would be important to identify what the influencing factors are when a coachee experiences PTG whilst attending coaching, such as the exploration of metaphors, the coaching relationship, coaching framework or methodology, reflective space, or something else not identified. The first author's own

knowledge and experience of PTG may also have been an influencing factor in the data analysis and coding.

Conclusion

There were key findings from this research; metaphors can help explain things that are difficult to explain and combined with coaching are helpful in talking about and reauthoring trauma; coaching is beneficial at the stage of constructive rumination (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014b); coaches have the capacity to fulfil the role of expert companion creating a reflective space to facilitate the creation of a coherent narrative of trauma and PTG; reviewing post coaching may be an important aspect of reflective learning; the use of metaphors are helpful for reauthoring for PTG and reflection with coachees who have experienced highly stressful life events.

The participants for this study had not sought coaching for PTG. However, their past trauma did arise as part of their coaching as they were seeking personal development. PTG does not occur with everyone who suffers a trauma (Tedeschi et al., 2018) and Post-traumatic growth may be an area of coaching that is under-researched and therefore the implications of coaches holding this space need to be considered. Spence and Joseph (2016) state that 'if coaches are to better understand and facilitate PTG, there is a need for researchers to explore questions related to its prevalence in coaching, its psychological dimensions, and its facilitating factors'. Cooper-Dickson et al.'s (2023) research raises an issue that coach training is insufficient to understand the complexity of challenges presented from historical traumatic events, yet recognised coaching can offer transformation for the client in moving forwards, as a catalyst for growth and storytelling and reauthoring. Coaches may often be dealing with individuals navigating trauma and severe adversities and therefore Trauma-informed practices (TIPs) could help coaches to understand how common trauma is.

The themes from this research suggest that knowledge of PTG domains, and symbolic language, would be useful if coaches wish to work with metaphors to avoid retriggering a trauma. Coachees can create a support network for referrals, and may also benefit from trauma-informed training. It is also vital that a coach does not assume, based on the language used or their narration of their trauma, that a coachee has experienced PTG. It is essential that concrete evidence of life changes and the domains of PTG be elicited rather than accepting the self-perceived PTG of a coachee (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006).

Further research should examine the difference between coaches who explicitly use metaphors in coaching and those who do not. Investigation into the difference between coaching methodologies and PTG, with coaches receiving training in metaphors, trauma, and PTG, and trauma and PTG without metaphor.

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