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Toward More Reflexive, Empowering and Ethical Metaphorical Organizational Research

Abstract

This study aims to take forward Gareth Morgan's call for more "reflexivity and self-deconstruction" (Morgan, 2011: 467) in metaphorical organizational research by developing a novel framework for the production and use of metaphors. Drawing on psychoanalytic theorizing, this framework seeks to move the field toward an approach to metaphors in which metaphors can be explored as symptoms of our struggles with unconscious desire. This, in turn, offers opportunities for engaging in more reflexive, empowering and ethical metaphorical research.

Key Words: Metaphor, Research, Reflexivity, Psychoanalysis, Lacan

Introduction

Metaphors are widely accepted in management and organization studies as an important part of language and the wider discourses through which organizational realities are socially constructed (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008: 48). While their suggested use is to generate “plurality and openness of meaning” (Cornelissen, 2005: 753), the persistent belief (Cornelissen, 2005: 753) that metaphors are “revelatory of the organizational subject under investigation” (Cornelissen et al., 2005: 1550) has prompted some to caution against the inevitable blind spots that the use of metaphors to study organizations involves. Morgan in particular underlines that metaphorical imagination gives rise to concepts which may become “overconcretized...as a description of reality” (1980: 612) often involving a “somewhat irrational commitment to the image of the subject of investigation” (Morgan, 1980: 611). As a result, researchers are cautioned to remain aware of their irrational commitments and practice “reflexivity and self-deconstruction” (Morgan, 2011: 467) encompassing both conscious as well as unconscious aspects (Morgan, 2011: 461).

The present study addresses itself to this project. In particular, it seeks to explore further how to understand this irrational commitment to the metaphorical images of organizations we create in view of unconscious dynamics. Drawing on a psychoanalytic, especially Lacanian framework (Lacan, 1977a;b;1988a;b; 1991; 2001), metaphors are considered as symptoms of an underlying struggle that we all face (Lacan, 1977a: 164). In this struggle, we try to express who we are and what we want so that we can obtain what we want. Unfortunately, it is impossible to express this. We are left with the illusion that we can do so while we continue to chase what we desire only to find that we never obtain it. Through the production and use of metaphors, for instance, organizational researchers might wish to find something that is foundational, essential, true or real about organizations by describing them through various metaphors.

Yet, in doing so, we always only alienate and displace the subject under investigation and are left with shifting meanings that seem to express an underlying lack more than an underlying real. The study explores how we often respond by covering this over. Despite protestations to the contrary, we are driven by this desire, which may constrain the way we produce and use metaphors. Yet, if we engage differently with this desire and recognize the impossibility of fulfilling it, we may arrive at more empowering and ethical ways of producing and using metaphors. Specifically, we may engage in a creative and empowering struggle (Fink, 2004: 62) with their lack and come to appreciate that a function of organizational metaphors may be to be found wanting. Put differently, we may invite the production and use of metaphors whose purpose it is to be found lacking so that we can take different, creative and potentially ethical positions toward their displacement. In this way, we may no longer exclude organizational subjects under investigation by objectifying or closing them down, but rather open up different engagements with organizations and their members in which we look for how metaphorical lenses we apply are disrupted, undermined and unsettled. In amplifying this, organizational researchers might relate differently to research subjects and use metaphors to co-construct research with participants in new ways.

With this perspective in mind, the study hopes to redirect current debates in the field about whether metaphor, as the dominant trope, enhances knowledge generation as much as Gareth Morgan may have hoped for (Oswick et al., 2002), and whether this should be addressed by deciding whether or not researchers should welcome “the frenzy of new metaphors in our field in recent years” (Cornelissen, 2005: 751). The study problematizes metaphorical organizational studies’ focus on developing more guidelines for how to select and evaluate metaphors (Cornelissen et al., 2005) seeking to limit the number of metaphors in the field in

order to improve the efficacy and explanatory power of metaphorical research. The psychoanalytic perspective developed here suggests that this may serve a defensive and disempowering role by which we are stuck in the illusion that we can get to an underlying essence while at the same time covering over the tensions that also exist. These tensions have so far been sought to be eliminated or covered over in an effort to improve organizational science, whether they are labeled as irrational commitments or blind spots. The present study instead suggests working with these tensions in novel ways to appreciate that the contribution metaphorical research can make is to surface how our struggle to “capture” something meaningful about organizations through metaphors is a reflection of our struggle to define who we are and what we desire. The study advances the idea that unconscious desire and subjectivity can be articulated differently by moving toward a playful surplus production of metaphors that makes space for and works with rather than against this struggle, offering empowering and transformative ways of understanding and exploring organizations.

The contributions the study hopes to make are as follows. It aims to contribute novel perspectives for how to engage in metaphorical thinking that is more reflexive and can encompass the kind of self-deconstruction previously called for (Morgan, 2011: 467) in view of the illusory nature of the self. Additionally, it highlights the role of the displacement of metaphors as an empowering and potentially more ethical practice of organizational research designed to play with an absence of underlying truth not as a shortcoming but a way to articulate differently the experience of work, self and organization (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007). In this vein, the study also underlines reflexivity and ethical engagements with research subjects by making space for them as subjects who may not be who they say they are or want what they say they want. Metaphorical displacement can help accommodate the contested nature of research

subjects in this fashion and also assist researchers in engaging differently with their own desire (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 73) and “representational practices” (Hardy et al., 2001: 555).

Finally, the study offers novel perspectives on how this may inform the poetic co-creation of research (Cunliffe, 2002: 128) and lead to more transformative and “box-breaking” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014: 967) metaphorical organizational research.

Metaphors in Organizational Research

Metaphor has been described as one, perhaps the dominant, organizational trope (Oswick, Keenoy and Grant, 2002), and defined as [quoting Sackman]: “a figure of speech in which a term or phrase with a literal meaning is applied to a different context in order to suggest a resemblance” (Taber, 2007: 542). Based on the idea that organization is a socio-linguistic construction (Sewell, 2010: 141) that can only be understood by mapping constructs from other domains onto it in order to generate at least “partial truths” (Morgan, 2011:463), metaphor has been advanced as being “fundamental to human knowing and experience as we carry over one element of life to understand and cope with another” (Morgan, 2011: 463). Metaphors have been acknowledged as crucial for understanding both epistemology and ontology in organization studies (Morgan, 2011: 463) and highlighted as “one of the primary ways by which scholars frame and understand the world of organizations” (Cornelissen and Kafouros, 2008a: 365).

Importantly, there continue to be lively debates in the field about how to take metaphors forward in order to enhance organizational theorizing (Cornelissen, 2004; 2005; 2006; Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen and Phillips, 2008; Oswick et al., 2002; Palmer and Dunford, 1996) with a focus on whether to carefully delimit the number of metaphors that are commonly used or, alternatively, to welcome a wide array of them. It seems that, at the moment, the former view prevails with some warning of what has been referred to as a “the frenzy of new

metaphors” (Cornelissen, 2005: 751). Therefore, while a number of metaphors have been added to Morgan’s root metaphors (1986), e.g. machine, organism, image and ecology, such as space, time, theater, virus, mafia, embryo, bunker, insomnia and death to name some (Bennett, 2011; Cafferata, 1982; Cornelissen, 2004; Cornelissen et al., 2005; Gond, Palazzo and Basu, 2009; Hassard, 2001; Schoeneborn, Blaschke and Kaufman, 2012; Reedy and Learmonth, 2011; Rovik, 2011), there continues to be a focus on the field on developing heuristics by which each metaphor can be judged and if necessary declared of limited or no use.

There seems to be a kind of heuristic checklist (Schoeneborn, Blaschke and Kaufman, 2012: 446) to assess metaphors. This checklist includes whether metaphors should be projected or elicited (Cornelissen et al., 2008), and whether they should inform only the target or also the source domain (Cornelissen, 2005), or stress similarity to make the familiar more familiar (Oswick, 2006). It also includes discussions on how concepts should be blended (Cornelissen, 2006a) and how metaphors should evolve from primary/root into complex metaphors (Cornelissen and Kafouros, 2008b). Additionally, there are debates about whether metaphors should be treated as only linguistic or also embodied phenomena (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008) and whether they have singular or multiple meanings that should or should not be studied in context (Riad, 2011).

Such heuristic debates seem to validate the idea that metaphorical theorizing can approximate a scientific project by which metaphors serve systematic theory development (Cornelissen, 2005) and enable researchers to access “organizational reality” (Cornelissen, et al., 2008: 9). Metaphors are said to be valuable with regard to generating “insights that allow us to understand what’s happening in a more informed way” (Morgan, 2011: 470) and “help us to act more appropriately or effectively in terms of what we are seeking to do” (Morgan, 2011: 470).

Metaphors are described as a “cognitive technology” (Morgan, 2011: 470) producing if not truth then “useful fictions” (Morgan, 1980: 610) that at once “represent and circumscribe the world of organizations” (Cornelissen et al., 2005: 1550). In this sense the heuristics used to delimit the production of metaphors also delimit the world of organizations.

In short, even if metaphors have been said to refer to partial and subjective truths (Morgan, 2011: 470), they represent a truth about how “humans attempt to objectify the world through means of essentially subjective processes” (Morgan, 1980: 610). In this sense, we can examine them as an irrational commitment to accessing something essential or foundational about organizations while engaging in a scientific project that is frequently reductionist and exclusionary (Fotaki and Harding, 2012; Wozniak, 2010). Moreover, it is not clear how along this path metaphorical organizational research can become, what some have called for, namely “a much more reflective and self-critical approach to scientific inquiry” (Morgan, 2011: 466). One way to take this project forward is to examine how this call may be realized by exploring how metaphors work in the context of unconscious desire and the wider struggle with the real we are unable to symbolize. I explore this in the next section by introducing key ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis.

A Psychoanalytic View of Metaphors

Before doing so, I should say that any attempt to outline or present Lacanian ideas is fraught with difficulty. First, Lacanian writing is hard to interpret, as it is intentionally left open-ended and not intended to be reduced to closed and objectifying ideas (Parker, 2005). Second, Lacanian writing is rather more apt for participation as a creative journey or a “simulacrum of desire in movement – a carnival” (Bowie, 1991: 200), and therefore difficult to present within

the project of academic writing. Third, Lacanian ideas are intended for clinical practice and require translation to be helpful in the context of organizational research (Parker, 2005: 166).

Having said that, Lacanian ideas have been successfully worked with in organization studies and found to be relevant for understanding the organizational subject (Stavrakakis, 2008). Moreover, the complexities of many organizational dynamics have been illuminated using a Lacanian framework, see for example Hoedemaker and Keegan's study of performance (2010), Driver's exploration of learning (2010) and Vanheule, Lievrouw and Verhaeghe's investigation of burnout (2003). Lacanian ideas have been described as being relevant to other disciplines as they "acknowledge the individuality and complexity of the human subject" (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 19). They have also been advanced as an irreducible truth for science in specific (Glynos, 2002: 58) and human endeavors in general (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 188).

Key to understanding the Lacanian framework is the idea that language and discourse are central to understanding subjects. Specifically, subjects are forever caught in what Lacan referred as the triad of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (Bowie, 1991: 98). That is, when individuals speak, they articulate who they are and what they want through the symbolic, the linguistic conventions imposed through generations of others. Yet, all they ever obtain from such articulations are imaginary and illusory constructions of the self as who they consciously think they are and what they consciously identify as what they desire. Such imaginary constructions are based on the fundamental fantasy (Fink, 1996: 89) that it is possible to know who one is and obtain what one wants, returning to a state of wholeness and completion. However, neither the symbolic nor the imaginary order can ever do that. From both, the real is missing. The real being that which is at the heart of the subject but lost as soon as the self is articulated. It is only present as that which disrupts the symbolic order and any imaginary constructions of the self. Those are

moments when the real makes an appearance just long enough “to say ‘No’ (Fink, 1995: 41) or as an absence made present (Ragland, 1996: 200).

Metaphor, in turn, has been identified by Lacan as a key linguistic mechanism for how subjectivity is articulated (Lacan, 1977a: 157.) Metaphor as “one word for another” (Lacan, 1977a: 157) is also a key mechanism through which the unconscious functions (Fink, 2004: 72). The conscious self is constructed in language, namely as an attempt to keep the signified from sliding under the signifier (Lacan, 1977a: 160), and thereby to get to the real. It is through metaphor that the subject’s symptom can be understood: “metaphor is the very mechanism by which the symptom, in the analytic sense, is determined” (Lacan, 1977a:166). Metaphor or “metaphoric structure” is at the heart of how we construct the self and seek to fulfill desire “in the substitution of signifier for signifier” (Lacan, 1977a: 164):

[I]f the symptom is a metaphor, it is not a metaphor to say so, any more than to say that man’s desire is a metonymy. For the symptom *is* a metaphor whether one likes it or not, as desire *is* a metonymy, however funny people may find the idea (Lacan, 1977a: 175).

Lacan is suggesting that metaphor is the linguistic operation through which individuals consciously seek to articulate who they are and what they want so that they can fulfill their desire. However, this only expresses a symptom because the real they are desiring is lost to them. Underneath all signification is always “a lack of being” (Lacan, 1977a: 166).

Lacanian psychoanalysis cannot free us from the imaginary nor reconnect our metaphors to the real (Lacan, 1977b: 218). The unconscious remains unknowable. The symptom expresses only an alienated self that cannot fulfill its unconscious desire. This subject however does not disappear. It always resurfaces disrupting conscious self-constructions. This is the function Lacan refers to as metonymy. If metaphors represent a mechanism by which we try to fix the self and desire, metonymy represents the opposite function, namely that of continually displacing

metaphors, because they do not represent what is unconsciously desired. Yet, it is in the very displacement of metaphors that we can see a glimpse of the subject as it negates the metaphor thereby pointing to the real as an absence made momentarily present (Fink, 1995: 41).

In short, metaphors, as Morgan pointed out, incidentally, by citing Lacan (1983: 602), are fundamental to understanding the structural conditions of subjectivity. Specifically, through metaphors, humans seek to link signifiers to the signified and attempt to fix meaning, self and desire, yet end up only placing one signifier on top of another in endless chains of signification that never reach the real, that is lost in our attempts to symbolize it (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 25). In other words, metaphors, like other signifiers, serve imaginary constructions which invariably fail as the connections made in the end signify nothing, as there is no underlying truth or real that drives any of this beyond the disruptions of an unconscious that knows nothing more about the elementary “than the elements of the signifier” (Bowie, 1991: 72). The metaphorical connections in a signifying chain:

extend as far downwards into the hidden worlds of mental process as it is possible for the speculative imagination to descend. Beyond the last outpost of signification there is nothing at all – or rather there is that boundless and inexpressible vacuity from which many psychoanalytic writers, including Freud himself, had tried to escape with their anxious talk of instincts and biological necessity (Bowie, 1991: 72).

With Lacan, then, we are thrown back on the vacuity of a connection to the real we desire but can no longer obtain as there is no guarantor of truth, not even nature or science (Glynos, 2002: 71). The real is lost as the price to pay for being born into the symbolic (Stavarakakis, 2008: 1044).

Metaphor like science, represents looking for the real whether it is to seek out “empirical facts, sensory perception, nature or God, the pursuit is to find the universal symbolic guarantee (...instead there is only the certainty of the subject’s singular jouissance and the desire it

sustains)” (Glynos, 2002: 60). The point of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to enable individuals to take different positions toward the absence of the real and thereby come to appreciate that while it is impossible to return to wholeness, it is nonetheless crucial to understand the enjoyment obtained from experiencing this. Specifically, Lacan underlined the importance of what he called *jouissance*. *Jouissance* refers to a bittersweet pleasure that comes precisely from the surplus value of what we unconsciously desire and what we consciously obtain (Fink, 2004: 162). And it is here that freedom and ethical choice can be exercised, not in overcoming the absence of the real but in experimenting with different positions toward it (Fotaki, 2009; Stavrakakis, 2008). In this sense, Lacan would likely agree with Morgan that all we ever obtain from signification, in general, and metaphor or metaphorical science, in particular, are “partial truths” (Morgan, 2011:463). However, Lacanian ideas help us to examine these partial truths not only from the vantage point outlined by Morgan as a pluralistic and multi-perspectival understanding of organizations (2011: 475). Rather they take this further by enabling us to reflect on metaphors as a creative struggle with desire and the illusory nature of the self.

Metaphorical Research from the Psychoanalytic View

The way metaphors are currently used in management and organization studies seems to be bounded by the traditional aim of systemic knowledge production and constrained by heuristics that limit the production of metaphors to safeguard what is considered to be organizational science (e.g. Cornelissen, Kaforous and Lock, 2005). This includes the production of more disciplined imagination (Cornelissen, 2006a: 1594), “making real-world inferences about the nature and dynamics of organizational life” (Cornelissen, 2005: 761) and using metaphors for “organizational development and planned change” (Jermier and Forbes, 2011: 448).

While nodding affirmatively toward subjectivity and the social construction of organizations (Jermier and Forbes, 2011: 446) and the intent of not delivering truth but rather “a wider range of understandings” (Palmer and Dunford, 1996: 703), from a Lacanian perspective, this nonetheless attempts to erase the subject through the fantasy of connecting to the real through systems of organizational knowledge. Metaphor, in this sense, is a means for defining the world around us, and thereby ourselves, and, as a result, fulfilling our desire for knowing who we are and what we want so that we can get it. Therefore, from a psychoanalytic perspective, metaphors can be understood as symptoms, or placeholders for unconscious desire, which, as currently used, objectify and foreclose subjects and desire. From this perspective, irrational commitments to metaphors can also be seen as affective attachments to fundamental fantasies that the real can be retrieved and any disruption or unsettling of such fantasies will need to be covered over in an attempt to preserve them.

From this perspective, systematic knowledge produced through the use of metaphors can be understood as a project that inevitably fails to articulate the real explaining why we “end up with a considerable body of knowledge, but that doesn’t teach [an organization or its members] very much about [their] own lost object at the place of truth” (Verhaeghe, 2001: 30). Hence, we may produce metaphors that reinforce the illusion that we can obtain the real and fulfill unconscious desires for wholeness. But in so doing we simply cover over that in every “dominant metaphor [is] ‘the metaphor of domination’” (Henderson, 2014: 335), i.e. that the price to pay for objectifying metaphors is that we lose connection with subjectivity.

Consequently, metaphors can also be explored as symptoms, literally as things that represent the subject (Fink, 2004: 104) in its never-ending search for a connection to the lost real. We can cover over such failures by understanding them as blind spots or shortcomings (Jermier and Forbes, 2011: 455) that we believe we need to, and can, correct for. That is, we can understand what remains excluded from metaphors (Smith and Simmons, 1983: 384) as a problem to be corrected, as we debate their heuristic value (Cornelissen, 2005), but maintain the belief that there is a guarantor as a kind of underlying truth that we can eventually get to.

However, we can also take an entirely different position toward metaphors as symptoms of subjects that tell us more by what they leave out than what they leave in. Truth, from this perspective, refers to how well metaphors may capture the truth of a particular subject as the position taken toward its lack (Brousse, 1996: 128). In this sense, the failure of a metaphor to answer our questions can be understood as the failure of any imaginary construction to tell us who we are and what we want. We can continue to get stuck ever further in the imaginary by seeking to eliminate this failure and find better and more accurate metaphors. Or we can appreciate that such failures tell us something valuable, namely that the metaphor fails to capture what we unconsciously seek and hence surfaces the real as an absence made momentarily present. Then we can use the negative ontology of subjectivity (Stavrakakis, 2008: 1041) to explore metaphors as a struggle with lack through which we obtain a sense of self (Lacan, 1988b: 223) as well as a sense of organizations. Knowledge, then, comes into view as an exercise in *jouissance* (Ragland, 1996: 193) in which we derive linguistic pleasure (Fink, 2004: 162), and pain, from failing to capture the real while surfacing it. Metaphors then can serve the empowering experience that we cannot define either the self nor work and organizations beyond a repeated experience that it is not what we are looking for (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007).

From this vantage point, metaphors become a linguistic playground offering at least “a margin of freedom” (Stavrakis, 2008: 1055) as we can take some distance from the imaginary that normally surrounds us and at least attempt to work through the fantasy that work and organizations can offer us what we are looking for (Hoedemaekers, 2009: 192). Like metaphors, work, self and organizations are fundamentally about nothing at all (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007), but it is in trying to cover over this nothingness and continue to find something real that we are driven on with enormous energy and thereby obtain a sense of self. This view of the self as fundamentally defined by lack then provides a radically different perspective on what it means to engage in reflexivity and self-deconstruction (Morgan, 2011: 467). If the self is illusory, reflexivity cannot be, as it often is, an effort to get rid of or correct for biases introduced by this illusion and, in effect, “to pin the subject down as an object of knowledge” (Parker, 2010: 165). Rather it has to be about working with the tensions that continue to unsettle this illusory self as the only connection that remains to the real as an absence made present. In this way, the self is not eradicated by being deconstructed, but rather it is worked with as a necessary illusion that reveals something of the subject’s truth, namely a particular combination of signifiers disrupted by the subject’s unconscious desire for something beyond reach.

Such a perspective enables us to examine metaphors not only as to how they produce blind spots or shortcomings (Jermier and Forbes, 2011: 455) or as to what is excluded from them (Smith and Simmons, 1983: 384) to validate their heuristic value (Cornelissen, 2005) but as an exercise in *jouissance* (Skoeld, 2010: 366) in which unconsciously the failure of the metaphor increases the pleasure derived from it. This makes metaphors “a valuable tool for liberation” (Jermier and Forbes, 2011: 448) in that its production is designed to unsettle the imaginary and allow subjects to appear at least momentarily by disrupting the chain of signification. This, in

turn, might facilitate the production of metaphors, even a “frenzy” (Cornelissen, 2005: 751) of metaphors, whose value it is to fuel jouissance, i.e. that we can play with and deconstruct them, and organizations, as endless and sliding chains of signifiers, whose purpose it is to facilitate our search but never to find what we are looking for.

This also highlights, however, that we need to continue to produce metaphors so we can experience how they are symptoms of our lack. Consequently, while this study underlines that “there is no real subject” (Hardy et al., 2001: 552) and that the scientific method can be de-humanizing (Hardy et al., 2001: 536) in its production of research subjects, it also advances the idea that it is precisely in continuing to engage in this endeavor that the absence of the real can be made present. As much as we cannot rid ourselves of the imaginary but can experience empowerment and liberation in its disruptions, metaphors need to continue to be generated so that we experience their unsettlement. From this perspective, a creative and empowering struggle (Lacan, 1977b: 243) can be shared when engaging in organizational research that produces and uses metaphors whose main value is to experience this struggle rather than to seek to erase or objectify it as scientific truth.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind that Lacanian writing is intended to remain open-ended and reminds us to refrain from coming to objectifying conclusions (Parker, 2010: 165), I use the word conclusions here cautiously. I wish to add interesting ideas to an ongoing conversation while being mindful of the imaginary project of academic writing (Driver, 2007). So when I offer conclusions I hope to do so in a way that opens up rather than forecloses what we might refer to as a metaphorical organizational science. In this spirit, the study advances metaphorical organizational theorizing, in general, and Gareth Morgan’s project towards new metaphorical

thinking and more “reflexivity and self-deconstruction” (2011: 467), in particular, by developing a framework allowing us to rethink the meaning and construction of organizational metaphors. This framework enables the deconstruction of the self by examining subjectivity in the context of unconscious desire and struggles with language to articulate the self and fulfill desire. Therefore, the first contribution the study hopes to make is to illustrate how Lacanian theorizing provides a number of new avenues for the generation and use of organizational metaphors.

Particularly, the framework facilitates the articulation and conceptualization of metaphors as an exercise in *jouissance*. In the generation and use of metaphors: “meaning is never fully present but ‘a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence’” (Cunliffe, 2002: 138). The study hopes to illustrate how in metaphorical organizational studies we can make space for the subject and engage more systematically with this “flickering” as the empowering experience of encountering what is unconsciously desired as an absence made present. Specifically, it hopes to underline the importance of reflecting on the production of organizational subjects (Hardy et al., 2001) as an encounter with their “relentlessly posing the question: ‘Why am I [not] what you are saying I am?’” (Skoeld, 2010: 372). That is, it hopes to underline the importance of the displacement of metaphors not as a heuristic criterion but as a way of taking forward more self-critical and empowering organizational research. This turns prior debates about the scientific value of metaphors (Cornelissen et al., 2005) on their heads by suggesting that it may be more effective to generate and use metaphors that seem to have quite a few blind spots (Jermier and Forbes, 2011: 455) because it is the blind spots that may be more revelatory of the subject under investigation. Put differently, rather than being a blemish on the generation and use of metaphors, blind spots may be what make metaphors rather valuable.

Additionally, the study furnishes further insight into how metaphors can be constructed from a Lacanian perspective in the context of the fantasy of overcoming fundamental lack. Therefore, it adds to our knowledge about metaphors in the context of epistemology and ontology (Morgan, 2011: 463). With regard to the former, it adds to our understanding of how metaphors relate to the process of knowing and what might drive this process from an unconscious perspective. With regard to ontology, it adds to our knowledge about why metaphors are “useful fictions” (Morgan, 1980: 610) that can only deliver “partial truths” (Morgan, 2011:463) because, from a Lacanian perspective, there is no truth outside of the particular truth of the subject. Metaphors as attempts to connect to something essential about organizations (Cornelissen, et al., 2008: 9) inevitably fail as both the imaginary and symbolic are barred from the real.

This underlines that metaphors may indeed enable “a wider range of understandings” (Palmer and Dunford, 1996: 703) of the organizational subject we are searching to reveal (Cornelissen et al., 2005: 1550) and, at the same time, allow researchers and readers to “speak differently” (Linstead and Marechal, 2015: 1483) about their experience of work, self and organization (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007). Specifically, it offers an entirely new way of engaging with organizational metaphors by exploring how the metaphors that are generated and used fail to “capture” the lived experiences of individuals in and around organizations. That is, there could be metaphorical research by which individuals are invited to reflect on how the metaphors they are offered perhaps to circumscribe some of what they experience but also how they do not. This could be a dialogic endeavor (Cunliffe, 2002) in which researchers do not try to correct for or even interpret when individual stories or responses do not seem to fit or in some

way unsettle a given metaphor, but instead simply amplify and make space for such tensions as indicators of disruptions of the imaginary.

Such a perspective also provides new opportunities for engaging with reflexivity. Gilmore and Kenny (2015) describe vividly how the self of the researcher is involved in the production of organizational research and how research subjects and researchers co-author selves. They describe how respondents frequently resist the process and how desire affects the research project. The perspective provided in this study takes these insights further. Specifically, it becomes possible to engage more directly with how subjects are produced as research subjects (Hardy et al., 2001) in imaginary ways and thereby covered over by the fantasy of systematic knowledge production. But it also becomes possible to show how this is resisted by subjects who use researchers to produce their own knowledge (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 66) only to find it lacking. By extension, reflexivity can include discussions of the researcher's self as split subject who not only co-created the research subjects (Hardy et al., 2001) but also has his/her own desires (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 73) to defend against lack via systemic knowledge production. This opens up an "infinite of meanings" (Hardy et al., 2001: 554) of reflexivity and potentially "new representational practices" (Hardy et al., 2001: 555) that make research not only more relational but ethical (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008).

In particular, research might be considered more ethical not only if it protects research subjects from harm but also if it seeks to accommodate rather than exclude them. If subjects are only present as an absence, it seems ethical to make and protect the space for this very absence to be experienced. The present framework allows organizational researchers to understand that any lines they draw are always already contested (Holt and Mueller, 2011). Importantly, it empowers those who construct research (Hardy et al., 2001) to experience these very lines as "a point that

has set itself in motion” (Holt and Mueller, 2011: 82), as research that is itself a living testimony to the vitality and power of being in this world as split subjects driven on by unconscious desire that is impossible to fulfill. As a dialogic practice in which both researchers and researched create more opportunities to experience that what they thought was “it”, like a metaphor that describes their experience of an organization, is not “it” again (Lacan, 1977b: 268) and thereby also obtain more energy to continue the search, enabling metaphorical research as an empowering and creative struggle in practice.

All of this offers opportunities for novel and transformational research practices (Rhodes, 2009: 665). For instance, it might be part of ethical practices, such as informed consent, to suggest that the researcher is interested not only in how metaphors are used but also how they are displaced, and to introduce the notion of carnival as an ethical stance for relational research (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008). Lacanian writing has been described in Bakhtinian terms as a “carnival” (Bowie, 1991: 200). It mirrors the work that the subject has to undertake (Ragland, 1996: 276) to assume responsibility for desire (Fink, 1996: 89) and thereby retain the “little bit of jouissance that remains” (Ragland, 1996: 209) when we no longer compare the perfect bliss promised by our fantasies to the enjoyment we receive. In this sense, research participants can be invited to reflect on some of the tensions produced in interactions with the researcher pointing to instances of displacement of a metaphor as arresting moments (Cunliffe, 2002). Put differently, respondents are invited to participate in the poetic construction as well as displacement of metaphors (Cunliffe, 2002) as visitors in a carnival are invited to join the festivities. For example, in a recent study (Latusek and Vlaar, 2015), the authors suggest that while the three metaphors they found seemed to dominate the narratives of managers as to how they understand their day-to-day activities, they are also mindful that this might be a reflection of their

methodology and irrational commitment to the metaphors employed. Using the framework developed here, the authors might have invited their respondents to reflect on this and indeed focused further on their participants' "micro-level" (Latusek and Vlaar, 2015: 226) behavior by asking them to play with instances when the metaphors were undermined rather than supported.

This shifts the focus in metaphorical research from using metaphors only to "circumscribe...the world of organizations" (Cornelissen et al., 2005: 1546) to also using them to celebrate abundance. Consequently, we may welcome a "frenzy of new metaphors" (Cornelissen, 2005: 751) and celebrate them like a carnival to provide much needed fuel for the endless conversations we are to have with our organizational subjects (Bresnen and Burrell, 2012: 27). That is, as an empowering research practice, we may set free our disciplined imagination (Cornelissen, 2006a: 1594) in more playful and creative ways to generate metaphors without worry of heuristic circumscription. If the ideal of a metaphorical organization science is in this sense the fundamental fantasy of wholeness and completion, the whole enterprise then shifts to working through this fantasy. Rather than to hold on to it while being further and further removed from the struggles researchers and researched face, here metaphorical research can model a way for engaging with them in creative ways.

A focus on the amplification of moments of metaphorical displacement also invites decentering the authority of the researcher (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 69) toward a more ethical and egalitarian research project. One way this could be practiced is not only to amplify metaphorical displacement but to take a more playful attitude. Laughter has been advanced as a hallmark of more hysterical organizational research (Fotaki and Harding, 2012: 161) in which we seek to avoid reductionist and exclusionary practices (Fotaki and Harding, 2012; Wozniak, 2010). It could be practiced in metaphorical organizational research by moving away from

feeling uncomfortable or pretending to gloss over moments when metaphors are contested or unsettled as part of the imaginary project of maintaining the researchers' credibility and professional identity (Harding, 2007). Instead, we could laugh with respondents and invite an openness not only to metaphorical pluralism (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008: 74) but to how we co-construct ourselves with our respondents. This underlines a willingness to play with the imaginary construction of being a researcher/scientist (Harding, 2007) as a way not to better understand but to resonate with the struggle and tensions experienced by research subjects as well. This might have been done, for instance, in Latusek and Vlaar's study (2015) referred to earlier, by laughing with respondents about how metaphors can be generated as well as displaced. In turn, it might not only be made more transparent that respondents use researchers as knowledge conduits (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 66) but to offer up this process intentionally as a gift for the respondents to play with. By asking respondents to reflect not only on how a given metaphor may articulate something they are experiencing but also how it fails to do so, researchers and researched can co-create different opportunities. Subjects have the opportunity to experience that what they thought they found is not "it" again and that desire remains elusive, as an empowering experience of preserving desire itself (Lacan, 1977b: 243).

As a result, the study also contributes additional meanings to the idea of poetically co-created research (Cunliffe, 2002: 128). Lacan thought that metaphors are the essence of poetry as the German word for the metaphorical function of condensing signifiers, *Dichtung*, literally means poetry (1977a: 157). Therefore, a new meaning of poetic research (Hughes, 2006) offered by this study is to allow us to circle our lack in creative ways and enable us to laugh more at our metaphorical organizational knowledge. As Fotaki and Harding point out: "Laughter in organizations...highlights the contested and ambiguous nature of overly-ambitious

symbolization” (2012: 161). So, by way of practicing research as a kind of “hysterical inquiry”, we might laugh more with all those we co-create relational research with, as an ethical act (Cunliffe, 2009). The ethical act consists of offering up our imaginary strivings for truth and certainty as way to experience with others that our inability to pin down meaning is a liberating and creative struggle. So rather than only noticing that we are seeking to co-construct imaginary roles and meanings as we engage with research subjects (Harding, 2007), we might use this as an opportunity to interrupt rather than interpret (Lapping, 2016: 721) as we share “pleasure” that our metaphor has happily failed again. This underlines, “that we, potentially, as humans, are always opening up such eventful displacements of once acceptable determinations” (Holt and Mueller, 2011: 82) including what metaphorical organizational research means to researchers and research subjects alike. Perhaps we can play with the idea that metaphorical research is there to experience how our attempts to objectify the world through subjective means (Morgan, 1980: 610) are necessary not because they succeed but they fail in so many particular instances. Each metaphor, in this sense, is an opportunity to assert that our conscious constructions are not ever powerful enough to delimit what we desire and we are capable of creating in the process.

This also opens up novel ways for engaging with organizational research with the potential for more “box-breaking research” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014: 967). It has been suggested that “organizational researchers need ways to open up text for multiple readings, to decenter authors as authority figures, and to involve participants, readers and audiences in the production of research” (Hardy et al., 2001: 554). Metaphorical organizational studies can be a model for how to achieve this providing for multiple readings of knowledge produced through the generation and use of metaphors. Metaphors are read both as knowledge about researched subjects and organizations as well as symptomatic and unsettled knowledge about how these

subjects and organizations are produced as they articulate symptoms through metaphors. It decenters authors as authority figures as they would be seen producing systematic but imaginary metaphorical knowledge. This in turn serves all research participants and readers of research to experience its carnivalesque function of being generated for jouissance (Bowie, 1991: 200). Therefore, this study advances the idea that metaphorical theorizing offers new ways for an ethical engagement with the desire to obliterate the very subjects we hope to account for in our research (Wozniak, 2010). It highlights that we can “speak differently” (Linstead and Marechal, 2015: 1483) about what it means to generate and use metaphors in organizational research as a more self-reflexive, empowering and ethical stance of engaging with research subjects while working through our shared fantasies that we can find what we are looking for through our work in and with organizations (Hoedemaekers, 2009: 192), as researchers and research subjects.

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