

A study on metaphors used by female teachers to describe their work-related stresses and psychological exhaustion: reflecting on potential interventions

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Summary

The past three decades saw the research development in the field of metaphoric thinking that laid a foundation within cognitive science on which culturally embedded concepts and action tendencies can potentially be explored. The present study aimed to identify female teachers' perceptions of work-related stresses and emotional challenges in Saudi Arabia. Using a qualitative methodology, a semi-structured interview along with two metaphor inventories, namely Stem-Sentence Test (SST) and Metaphor Inventory (MI) were employed to collect data. Forty female teachers participated in this study; 20 newly employed (NE) teachers and 20 teachers who have currently applied for early retirement (ER). Thematic analysis was used to categorise participants' metaphorical expressions and interpret the extracted themes. The findings show that there are differences and similarities in metaphors generated by the two groups. ER teachers compared with NE participants tended to have more pessimistic views, negative thoughts and unpleasant feelings towards the teaching profession. They expressed metaphors connected to *circular*, *incomplete* and *dark* thematic dimensions. However, both groups produced metaphors linked with *restricted* and *harmful* subthemes which implies the inherent systemic shortcomings in the teaching environment for female teachers. The findings might suggest clinical and therapy-related implications. Cognitive and behaviour change through changing metaphors will be reflected upon.

metaphors, thematic analysis, stress, burnout, early retirement

INTRODUCTION

Metaphor relevance

Metaphor is a form of figurative language which is used by people as a shared cultural means to convey implicit messages within a linguistic, conceptual system [1, 2]; that can result in cul-

tural understanding and determine actions and reactions [3]. In the past three decades, metaphoric thinking has gained research prominence in the field of cognitive science [4], supported by empirical evidence [5]. Analysis of metaphoric themes has a potential to provide a grounding on which culturally embedded concepts and action tendencies can be detected [6].

We took a qualitative approach in the present research to analyse metaphors used by female teachers working in Saudi Arabia, in order to elicit meanings concerning work-related stress,

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psychological exhaustion potentially leading to their tendency for early retirement. Early retirement (ER), which is retiring before reaching the official retirement age or certain number of years in service, amongst female teachers in secondary schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is of a serious concern to education policy-makers. According to the Ministry of Education (Saudi) [7], 74.4% of the total number of female retirees had taken ER, and from the teaching profession, the number of female teachers who applied for ER has been on rise for several years. Such statistics can be deemed as barriers to the country's development, and its goals to increase women's participation in the society and workplace [8].

Problem: Perceived stress and emotional difficulties

Work-related stress and burnout are among the most commonly investigated issues in health and organisational psychology and have captured scholars' attention from the 1970s [9]. Job burnout, in particular, frequently affects people who are working in professions that require a direct contact with others, including nurses and teachers [10, 11]. The risk of encountering job stressors including and not limited to role conflict, demands and control, could lead employees to experience both physical and mental consequences such as tension, strains, emotional disturbance and psychological disorders [12]. Recent research has identified the link between stressful work environment and burnout among workers [13], which can potentially result in low productivity, absenteeism, and employee withdrawal, various mental reactions, for instance, lack of energy and depression [14-17].

Numerous studies show that teaching is one of the most stressful professions [18-21] and the job can be "emotionally taxing and potentially frustrating" [22, p.105]. For female teachers, the high demands and low control that they are faced with at work might conflict with responsibilities at home usually giving rise to burnout [23].

The use of metaphor in this study

This study uses metaphors to provide insight into the experiences of stress, burnout and ear-

ly retirement in female teachers working in SA. According to Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor, everyday cognitive structures and linguistic models can be illuminated by exploring metaphors that allows us to investigate both individual and collective patterns of thoughts and actions. In other words, it plays an important part in everyday life activities concerning language, values, culture, thoughts and other mental functions [24]. Besides, the use of metaphors in conversations would help people communicate emotions and culturally embedded concepts, especially in the presence of potential obstacles which can be deemed against freely, explicitly expressing feelings and thoughts [25]. According to Moser (26), the analysis of metaphors is a classical research method in psycholinguistics that provide a full understanding of the micro-interactions between culture and cognition.

The aim of the study is to explore female teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession and its challenges through the metaphors they use to describe their everyday difficulties and emotional burdens they experience. In fact, metaphors present a unique experiential framework which allow teachers to describe their teaching experience using their own stories within the individual's culture and values [27].

In applied fields of research such as organisational and work psychology, metaphors can be effectively utilised to gain insight into worker's perceptions and experiences [28]. This approach is believed to probe and denote connotations and implicit information deep-seated in metaphors which cannot be uncovered by using other research methodologies [25]. Based on this rationale, researchers have found the metaphor – eliciting approach pertinent to be used in the field of education [29]. Bearing in mind the less expressive cultural context of the Saudi society, particularly for women [30], exploring metaphors in the current study seem a suitable method to be employed in the current study. Suffice to say that people using metaphors would express their feelings and thoughts with less resistance or reluctance.

In present study, metaphors and metaphoric phrases were collected from both female teachers applied for early retirement and those who were newly employed. The latter were includ-

ed in this study as it is assumed that new teachers are less affected by the work-related stresses and hardship, thus it can provide a comparison source. This would enable us to gain an insight into how cultural values and imperatives shape the state of burnout and emotional challenges which eventually lead to early retirement in this particular cultural context. The multifaceted properties of metaphor can be revealed which would potentially enhance our knowledge on the interactions between language, culture, and cognition [5]. It is suggested that metaphors utilised by female teachers in the current study to express their feelings and cognitions with regard to job stresses, burnout and tendency for early retirement would embody a potential set of clinical orientations and therapeutic ramifications.

METHOD

Participants

Forty female teachers volunteered to participate in the study. The sample comprised twenty teachers who had applied for early retirement (ER) (mean age=44, SD=1.32 age range = 40-45yrs) and twenty newly employed (NE) teachers (mean age=28, SD=2.955 age range = 22 – 37yrs) who started their teaching job within the last two years. Mean years of being in service were 16yrs and 1yr in ER and NE groups respectively. The participants were from both urban and rural areas of Riyadh city. Participants were recruited based on convenience sampling. A list of contact details of potential ER and NE female teachers was received from the Saudi Ministry of Education and used to contact and invite prospective participants.

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Bedfordshire, School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

METHODS

Interview and qualitative inventories

The interviews consisted of two parts; some general questions and the completion of two qualitative inventories (details provided below). In response to the initial questions, interview-

ees had to answer how they see the teaching job and how they describe their relationship with the pupils. By this, the interviewer tried to help respondents to familiarise themselves with the use of metaphors and similes to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences in teaching environment. After this familiarisation phase, two qualitative inventories (see details below) were employed to explore the metaphors and metaphoric phrases expressed by participants to liken their teaching experiences. Besides, participants completed two other questionnaires, one on mental health, and the other on burnout. Interviews and inventories were conducted in Arabic.

Stem-Sentences Test (SST): SST [31] consists of 9 stem-sentences in response to which the respondent is required to complete each item as a full sentence. The original items of the SST were tailored based on the aims of the present study. The stem-sentences are intended to detect interviewees' attitudes, feelings and thoughts about topics such as teaching, future, past, failure, relationship, stress and difficulties (e.g., 'When I think about my job as a teacher, I see it like ...'). The items are required to be completed with metaphorical expressions.

Metaphor Inventory (MI); MI [31] encompassed 12 open-ended questions designed to elicit metaphors used by people to liken life experiences concerning work. The MI items were tailored for the present study bearing in mind the study objectives. In response to the questions, participants express their views and attitudes regarding their work experience such as future, self, others, failure, stress and the like using metaphors (e.g., 'If you do get stressed at work, to what do you liken your job?').

Clinical measures

To compare two groups concerning level of mental health and burnout, two other questionnaires (in Arabic) were used.

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ): GHQ-12 [32] is a short form measure with 12 items that examines the possibility of psychiatric symptoms including those related to depression, anxiety, social disfunction and health issues. Each response is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 to 3.

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI): The MBI [33] includes 22 items which measures three subscales, namely, emotional exhaustion (which tests feelings of being emotionally overreached and exhausted by work), depersonalization (designed to measure impersonal problems and negative responses, and finally personal accomplishment (which examines feelings of capability and achievement in the work environment. MBI items are rated using a 7-point scale ranging from never (0) to everyday (6).

PROCEDURE

The study was conducted after getting the permission letter and a list of teachers' contact details from the Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia. Then phone calls were made to contact potential volunteers in the two ER and NE groups.

Participants participated in an individual semi-structured interview which started with two initial questions on how they would see the teaching job and how they would describe their relationship with pupils using similes. These two questions were intended to help interviewee become familiar with the use of metaphor to describe teaching experiences before they complete the metaphor inventories, namely SSM and MI. Finally, two other questionnaires, namely GHQ-12 and MBI were administered to assess the level of participants' mental health difficulties and burnout respectively. Interview and completing the questionnaires took around 30 minutes.

The interviewer was a trained female psychologist, fluently speaking Arabic. She held a master's in Education, sufficiently qualified for psychological assessment with years of working experience in the education system. For further training, she conducted a pilot study with 4 participants and undertook thematic analysis and categorization. The outcome was evaluated by an expert in metaphor analysis and feedbacks were given to be incorporated in the main study.

Using the Johnson's definition [1, 2], the interviewer extracted the expressed metaphors. She also proposed the emotional valence (positive, neutral and negative) for each metaphor or metaphoric phrase and categorised them into different themes. Further details on the categorization will be described in next sub-section.

Validity of the measures

The qualitative inventories used in the interview, were translated to Arabic language, then culturally adapted to be compatible for the present study. Translation and back-translation method was employed to ensure that each translated measure is culturally adaptable and linguistically relevant to the society's culture in which the study takes place [34]. Firstly, the SST and MI items were translated from English to Arabic by a translator. In the second phase, they were translated back to English by a bilingual Arabic-English speaker. Thirdly, two native English speakers compared the back translated items with the originals. They commented on the content, meanings, and semantics of all items. If there was any discrepancy, those items were again translated to English, then back translated to English. Once again, the native English speaker compared back translated items with original ones and confirmed them. The final Arabic versions of SST and MI were reviewed by two psychologists from Saudi Arabia and checked for any culturally sensitive point.

GHQ-12 and MBI in Arabic have been previously validated and used in Arab countries [35].

Thematic data analysis

To identify metaphors, we used Lakoff and Johnson's inclusive definition as a guideline, in which metaphoric expressions are seen as evoking a conceptual transaction between contexts of meaning [1, 2]. According to this theory, the transaction between contexts has, in addition, a transformative role in our understanding so that a new point of view can be created. Using thematic analysis, which is rightly located within the rubric of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), open-coding method was employed in order to code data in every possible way [36]. In fact, an inductive methodology was used to establish possible categories. This method of analysis suggests that the ultimate end is to detect connotations across emergent themes. Following this framework, the assessor first tried to code the extracted metaphors based on their thematic similarities and inductively sort them into as many sub-ordinate cate-

gories as they could fit. The initial sets of themes are then re-visited and re-examined to ensure that firstly it was grounded in the data; secondly to check for connections and possibility of combining the emergent themes under as fewer grand themes as they can be categorised; and finally to review the data and re-check them to see if every possible steps have been effectively taken to make sense of the data sufficiently within the relevant thematic entities.

Bearing in mind the sentence context in which the metaphors were expressed, metaphoric phrases were divided into three positive, neutral and negative based on their emotional valence. From the first round of categorisation, 25

themes emerged according to their characteristics and connotations. The second round of inter-theme review allowed the assessor to combine the emerged themes into 10 themes based on possible shared connections and connotations. Once the generic categories were identified, a fellow psychologist was asked to revisit the metaphors and their thematic categories including sub-ordinate categories. If there was any disagreement, it was resolved through discussion. Each theme encompassed two dichotomous sub-categories, representing two opposite dimensions, for instances, PROGRESSION, (*Progressive, Circular*) and LIGHT (*bright, dark*). Table 1 demonstrates metaphoric themes, sub-themes and related examples.

Table 1. Themes, subordinate themes and examples of dichotomous dimensions

Themes	Sub-ordinate Themes	Examples
PROGRESSION	Progressive	Teaching is like growing tree.
	Circular	Teaching is like going around a circle, it ends at where we started.
RESPONSIBILITY	Committed	Teachers are like prophets and messengers.
	Uncommitted	If the lord of the house is a drummer, we won't expect the whole house to do anything but dancing
COMPLETENESS	Complete	Like organs in one body working together and complete each other
	Incomplete	The future to me is like a book with missing pages.
LIGHT	Bright	My colleagues are like lamps lightening the place
	Dark	The future to me is totally dark
MOVEMENT	Moving	Other people see me like a dynamo, non-stop working
	Motionless	When I become stressed I will be like a disabled person – can't move.
FREEDOM	Free	I will be like a bird flying from a cage
	Restricted	It feels like being in prison
CONFRONTATION	Confront	I see myself as a superhero, I always try my best to overcome issues at work
	Avoid	I feel I want to escape to an isolated island.
TREATMENT	Helpful	My colleagues are like the source of energy in my job
	Harmful	My job is like being inside a pressure cooker.
CONSEQUENCE	Good	Teaching is like farming, exhausting but worth it at the end.
	Bad	Stress is like swimming with a shark.
POSITION	High	Making effort in my job is like reaching the top of the mountain
	Low	My Job future is like death.

To exemplify how the metaphors were categorized, metaphoric phrases like 'Teaching is like growing tree' (the sub-theme *progressive*)

and 'Teaching is like being in cycle, it ends at where we started.' (the sub-theme *circular*) were clustered under the generic theme of PROGRES-

SION; similarly, metaphoric phrases like ‘future is dark’ (the sub-theme *dark*) and ‘a light at the end of a dark tunnel’ (the sub-theme *bright*) fell under the generic theme of LIGHT. All metaphors were grouped in this manner (see Table 1 for more examples in each category).

RESULTS

Group differences on clinical measures

T-test was performed to statistically compare the results of two groups on GHQ-12 and MBI. ER participants (mean=25.56, SD=8.08) scored higher than their NE counterparts (mean=17.83, SD=2.98) on GHQ-12 presenting more mental health issues ($t_{38}=2.30, p<0.05$). Moreover, ER teachers (mean=98.78, SD=15.61) scored more highly on MBI compared to NE teachers (mean=78.17, SD=12.31) ($t_{38}=2.31, p<0.05$).

Metaphors expressed by ER and NE group

A total of 840 of metaphor related responses to the items of two qualitative inventories were identified, of which ER and NE participants produced 391 and 396 metaphor phrases respectively. The metaphor phrases were then thematically analysed and categorised into different themes and subthemes. In first phases of thematic analysis, 53 metaphors (6%) were excluded as they were not fitted in the emergent themes; remaining 787 metaphoric phrases were used in developing themes. After combining the themes, responses were coded and categorised under the relevant sub-themes. This was done by working out the actual percentage of subthemes in each group (ER, NE) separately. Table 2 presents the percentage of metaphoric themes and subthemes in ER and NE groups. Over all, in comparison with NE group, ER participants tended to provide more metaphors with connotations associated with *circular, incomplete, dark, restricted, bad, and low* dimensions. The group differences will be discussed looking at metaphor examples in both group.

Table 2. Metaphoric themes, subthemes and percentage within each group

Metaphorical Themes	Themes Dimensions	ER	NE
PROGRESSION	Progressive	18%	83%
	Circular	82%	17%
RESPONSIBILITY	Committed	71%	79%
	Uncommitted	29 %	21%
COMPLETENESS	Complete	37%	100%
	Incomplete	63%	0%
LIGHT	Bright	11%	32%
	Dark	89%	68%
MOVEMENT	Moving	49%	48%
	Motionless	51%	52%
FREEDOM	Free	4%	5%
	Restricted	96%	95%
CONFRONTATION	Confront	61%	45%
	Avoid	39%	55%
TREATMENT	Helpful	9%	13%
	Harmful	91%	87%
CONSEQUENCE	Good	76%	90%
	Bad	24%	10%
POSITION	High	79%	89%
	Low	21%	11%

Concerning the metaphor emotional valence, Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages of negative, neutral or positive metaphors and metaphoric phrases in ER and NE groups. The findings show that ER respondents provided more negative metaphors than their NE counterparts.

Table 3. Frequency (%) of the metaphors valence in ER and NT groups

	Valence			Total
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
ER	272 (64.5%)	3 (1%)	145 (35%)	100%
NE	197 (47%)	3 (1%)	220 (52%)	100%

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to identify female teachers’ perceptions of and attitudes towards work-re-

lated stresses and emotional challenges in the Saudi Arabia cultural setting. Within qualitative methodology, thematic analysis was employed to detect and interpret various aspects of metaphors produced by newly employed (NE) teachers compared with those expressed by early retirement (ER) applicants. ER participants reported more mental health issues and higher level of burnout than their NE counterparts. On the whole, ER group provided metaphors and metaphoric phrases with more negativity than NE teachers. The findings, furthermore, suggest that ER participants reported more mental health issues and burnout sign at work.

Metaphoric themes produced by ER teachers tend to fall under *circular* (sub-themed *under PROGRESSION*), *incomplete* (*COMPLETENESS*), *dark* (*LIGHT*), *harmful* (*CONSEQUENCE*), and *low* (*POSITION*) sub-ordinate themes more frequently than those produced by NE counterparts. Looking at the theme *PROGRESSION*, for instance metaphoric phrases like 'a bull walking in a circle', more used by ER group, were clustered as *circular*; and metaphors like 'a growing tree', more expressed by NE group, were categorised as *progressive*. Concerning *COMPLETENESS*, ER respondents likened their teaching experiences more frequently with metaphors like 'a blank page, nothing on it yet' which falls under *incomplete* subtheme; while NE participants described their teaching experiences using more frequently metaphoric phrases like 'I and colleagues are like the body organs working in harmony and completing each other', categorised under *complete* subtheme. Within the generic theme of *LIGHT*, ER teachers tended to express metaphors sub-themed as *dark*, for example 'scary and dark like the night' than NE group that provided more metaphors linked to subtheme of *bright* like 'a shiny sunny morning'. Although, NE group tended to produce more metaphors categorised within the positive thematic dimensions sub-themed under *LIGHT* compared to ER group, still majority of the light-related metaphors in both groups are clustered under *dark* subtheme. Regarding *CONSEQUENCE* theme, more metaphors were categorised as *bad* in ER group like 'graveyard is the ending' compared with those produced by interviewees in NE group who tended to express more metaphors associated with *good* sub-

theme like 'a bee producing honey'. Under this theme, majority of metaphors produced by two groups still fall under *good* dimension. ER teachers used more metaphors classified under *POSITION* subtheme of *low* like 'falling from the top', while metaphors produced by NE group fell under subtheme of *high* like 'reaching the top of the mountain'. Again, both groups tended to provide more metaphors in *high* than *low* dimensions.

The findings show a similar thematic pattern of responses for participants in ER and NE groups concerning the metaphoric phrases categorised under themes connoting *RESPONSIBILITY*, *MOVEMENT*, *FREEDOM* and *TREATMENT*. In terms of *RESPONSIBILITY*, both groups provided more metaphoric phrases categorised under *Committed* subtheme like 'committed like a bee' compared with *uncommitted* subtheme, for example 'a rebel against the rules'. Subthemes of *MOVEMENT* were grouped equally with half the metaphors in *moving* (e.g. 'moving bees in the workplace') and the *motionless* (e.g. 'a hard rock, unable to move') subthemes in each group. This might suggest some type of mental paralysis which can be seen as a response to stress. Regarding *FREEDOM*, metaphors were categorised as *free* like 'a bird flying from cage' and *restricted* like 'being cuffed, unable do anything'. A large majority of metaphoric responses in both groups was on *restricted* side. Again, under *TREATMENT* theme, both group expressed more metaphors connoting *harmful* (e.g. 'hot to burn') than *helpful* (e.g., 'the air conditioner which cool you down') effect.

In terms of the theme *CONFRONTATION*, ER participants generated more metaphors linked with *confront* dimension compared to NE group. Looking at the metaphors in each group, it seems that the ER participants tended to produce metaphors with fury and horror tones (e.g., 'Working as a fighter' or 'struggling, falling into the abyss') and with a competitive tone in NE group (such as 'a sport game and competition, you try to win' or 'superhero to remove the obstacles'). The *avoid* subtheme included examples like 'running away from the hell' in ER and 'escaping to an isolated island' in NE.

Concerning emotional valence of metaphors, by and large, ER respondents generated metaphor words or metaphoric phrases with nega-

tive emotional tone than their NE counterparts. In addition to that, ER group expressed more metaphors connected to *circular*, *incomplete* and *dark* effects, apparently connoting a pessimistic view among teachers who have previously applied for early retirement compared with newly employed teachers who seem to embrace an optimistic view. This is in line with the above-mentioned finding suggesting ER group were more likely to provide *confront* metaphors with fury and horror tones; such a negativity and despair is not observed in NE group. However, ER and NE groups share negative views as their responses under themes FREEDOM and TREATMENT reveal that both tended to produce metaphors linked with *restricted* and *harmful* subthemes. All things considered, it can be concluded that ER participants experienced a chronic, long lasting stressful situation at workplace, apparently having resulted in burnout and tendency to retire early; although new teachers, taken part in this study, pointed to the presence of hinderance and hardship at work environment right from the beginning. With this in mind, the environment in which Saudi female teachers are working would seem to face inherent problems and issues that eventually put the them at risk of exhaustion and disengagement. One might conclude that this relates to the lack of effective, optimal work standards in the cultural setting of Saudi Arabia educational system particularly for female workers.

In the present study, motionless-related metaphors were equally used by respondents in both groups. The metaphors categorised under *motionless* were also found to be used by depressed patients in previous studies [31]. The concept of *moving* (opposite *motionless*) signifies in a way the sense of moving through life and any restriction in life would be associated with the feeling of being stock, being less able to move. The same study also reported that DARKNESS related metaphors were mostly used by depressed patients to express their depressive feeling [31]. According to the history of writings since the time of Hippocrates, BEING IN DARKNESS has been used to liken depression (or melancholia) [37].

The present findings imply clinical, therapy-related ramifications. For instance, metaphors expressed by ER as well as NE teachers might denote feelings and cognitions experienced by them and finally inform relevant psy-

chological intervention to help female teachers to tackle more effectively their work challenges and related emotional disturbances. It is suggested that changing metaphor would facilitate the change process leading to cognitive and behaviour [38]. Metaphor has long been of interest in transforming meanings in therapy setting [39]. Within CBT framework of therapy, Kuyken, Padesky and Dudley [40] supported the use of metaphor. This can include both the purposeful use of metaphor by therapist [41] and paying attention to client's metaphors [42].

With this in mind, the interventions would focus on encouraging the affected teachers to reflect on their feelings embedded in the metaphors expressed by them and try to make sense of the implicit potential meanings that metaphors carry in the context of teaching. In this way, we, by offering such interventions, might be able to help them realise that changing their figurative language expression could give rise to a more effective thoughts and better feelings. Using CBT techniques such as assertiveness and problem solving, can also be seen influential to help burned-out teachers to manage their workplace more effectively [40]. Besides, working in a community with a diverse cultural/ethnic background, therapists need to be competent in using relevant knowledge and skills [43]. Being alert towards metaphors used by clients would greatly help be aware of implicit meanings behind figurative language used within counselling session. This would give rise to greater sensitivity towards clients, enhance a better communication and incorporate into more effective treatment strategy [44, 45].

Preventing ER amongst female teachers in Saudi Arabia is of great concern to educators and policymakers. Keeping qualified and well-experienced teachers will not only benefit the pupils, it also will contribute effectively to the in-service training of new teachers. Metaphor analysis in this study provide an indication that would potentially highlight implications which, in turn, provide impetus for provision of helpful interventions.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Caution should be observed when interpreting the findings of the present study, bearing in

mind its limitations which may challenge any generalization. Future study would address other life challenges and difficulties (apart from teaching) that female teachers facing. This might add to the picture portrayed by the present report. The sample was limited to female teachers, without knowing the how male teachers might provide in response to similar questions. Potential gender differences and similarities will be useful in terms of roles defined by culture.

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