

Journey, Cleansing, and Restrospective Imaginary Line: Multi-methaporical Perspectives of Organisational Change

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Abstract. This study aims to explore a wider range of metaphors which are used in explaining organisational change. Case study is employed as a research strategy. The case organisation is a tax administration, which undertook a change initiative in the 2000s and experienced problems with corruption. Data were gathered through interviews, focus groups, and visual methods (using drawings). This study contributes to the literature by showing a wider range of change metaphors, other than the traditional metaphor of 'journey'. However, the emergence of diverse and uncommon metaphors cannot be separated from the context, i.e., corruption, which is largely overlooked in the change management literature. This supports the notion of the importance of context in the use of metaphors and in the study of organisational change.

Keywords: Metaphors · Organisational change · Visual methods · Reform · Corruption

1 Introduction

Metaphors have been used for decades as important management tools [1] to explain organisations [2]. Metaphors assist us view organisations through different lenses [3], as they can create 'a compact and distinctive description of the complex life within an organisation' [2 p. 113]. Notwithstanding metaphors' effectiveness in understanding organisational change's circumstances and resolving issues in the change process, there has been disagreement on the best change metaphors [4]. Some authors use single metaphor, such as 'brain' [5], which reflects the organisation's flexibility and capability to respond rapidly to external stimuli. Other scholars suggest multiple metaphors, such as machines, organisms and psychic prisons [6], which may help understand specific organisational changes [7]. This disagreement is due to diversity in the assumptions and ontological and epistemological approaches taken to organisation theory [7].

One commonly used metaphor to describe change is the 'journey' metaphor. It is a 'traditional metaphor' which is used to describe a change process that is complex, uncertain, and unpredictable [8]. To reflect this unpredictability, the journey metaphor of a 'sea voyage' is often used, illustrating that there is a goal (although distant) and perils along the way [9]; a journey with a bumpy ride [10]. The 'journey' is a powerful metaphor, since it 'embraces change, as opposed to the more static' [11 p. 810].

Other authors find more static metaphors of change, unlike those involving a journey, growth or movement. For example, in Barner's [12] research, the metaphor of

a dark tower was used to describe employees' negative emotions regarding the management of change, and was depicted in a drawing. The context of the change may have influenced the choice of the metaphor, since the change had been implemented by top leaders who were new to the organisation. As Kövecses [13] states, metaphors are closely linked to context. He suggests that context not only facilitates the interpretation of metaphors, but also guides users in choosing or creating metaphors. Therefore, exploring how metaphors are used in other contexts will be fruitful for the study of metaphors in organisations. This may answer Oswick and Grant's [14] call for more applied research on metaphors in organisation studies, and to explore more tropes linked to metaphors.

In the context of public sectors, organisational change is widely known as 'reform' rather than 'change' [15]. In their review on the management of change in public organisations, Kuipers *et al.* [15] identified some of reform contextual drivers, including public demands, emergence of new technologies, financial crises and issues related to the central governments (e.g., changes in policies, regulations or financing). It is surprising that the literature on change management in the public sectors has not addressed corruption as the contextual background. In other fields outside management studies, there has been a strong link between public sector reforms and (the fight against) corruption. Civil service reform is believed as an inevitable way to combat corruption [16], as both corruption and reform are 'two sides of the same coin' [17 p. 589].

To fill the gaps, this study aims to explore a wider range of metaphors which are used in explaining organisational change in the context of public sector corruption, using a tax administration reform¹ as a case study. The case organisation undertook a change initiative in the 2000s and experienced problems with corruption. The next section will present the research methods which are employed in this study.

2 Research Methods

This study used different methods of collecting the data, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and visual methods. Projective drawing is chosen as one of the methods in this study as the catalyst to say the unsaid [18], due to the sensitivity of the topic, i.e., corruption. Following the previous studies [19], [20], [21], [22], the design of the visual methods in this study included the interviews or discussion sessions, either individually or in a group. In this way, a fuller understanding of the meaning of the images can be obtained through the participants' interpretations [22], since images are interpreted differently by different individuals [23].

For the drawing technique, the procedure which was used in this study followed Broussine's [20] suggestion, which involved four phases: 1) asking each participant to produce an individual drawing, 2) asking participants to reflect on the individual image and write down words at the back of each picture, 3) group discussion in which participants show and tell their images and discuss in a group, and 4) group reflection on the process.

¹ Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the name of the tax agency is kept anonym.

After following these procedures, in total, 20 semi-structured interviews (without images) and two focus groups (with 21 participants and drawings) were conducted. The participants come from different levels of the organisational hierarchy (from senior manager to staff) and different divisions at different types of tax offices around the country.

All interviews, whether individual or group, were tape recorded with the participants' permission and then transcribed verbatim. There has been not much literature on the analysis of materials produced within the visual research. In this study, the transcribed interviews and discussions of the drawings are analysed thematically [19]. The next section will discuss the results of the data analysis.

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Journey

This study finds different kinds of metaphors of change, which support the multi metaphors view. Although the range of metaphors is diverse, change as a 'journey' and the change 'obstacles' are dominant in focus group 1 (which consists of junior staff members of various tax offices). Almost half of the group members described the organisational change as a journey, for example a journey from a desert to an oasis, climbing a hill or steps, and driving or running along a road. Although depicted in various kinds of images, almost all journeys were described as having obstacles and aims. However, each individual had a different interpretation on the 'aim' and 'obstacles'. Table 1 shows a couple of examples of the drawings, the corresponding quotes, and the differences of the aim and obstacles. The images are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1. The journey, obstacles and aims.

Figure	The Journey	Obstacles	Aims
Figure 1	A road: from a desert to an oasis. 'The tax agency would like to move forward from this desert toward a more fertile territory. Well, it should go through a process, which is the reform.'	A long and tortuous road. 'It cannot be achieved in one night or in a short time, because the road is long and tortuous – many obstacles.'	A better organisation. 'However, it leads to something better, in this case a better organisation.'
Figure 2	Climbing a hill. 'I liken [the change] to a process like climbing a hill.'	Ravines, and a long and winding road. 'If seen from the foot of the hill, there must be many negative sides that we see, such as ravines and also a long and winding road.'	Top of the hill: beautiful view. 'We can see something from the peak, which tends to be more beautiful.'



Fig. 1. From a desert to an oasis. **Fig. 2.** A long, winding, and uphill road.

The change management literature suggests that using the ‘journey’ metaphor to describe change is common. The journey metaphor in this study conveys the same meaning as explained in the literature. As shown in Table 1, virtually each journey has a goal and obstacles. Participants perceived that the change aimed for something good (as reflected in the metaphors used for the ‘aim’, presented in Table 1). However, despite the participants’ positive views on the objective of the change, the metaphors for the ‘obstacles’, e.g., a ‘long and winding road’, indicate that it was not a short and easy journey. This finding is consistent with the literature [8], [10], [11].

Marshak [24] suggests that the use of metaphors could describe the types of the organisational change processes. Comparing the metaphors used in the above finding with his theory shows that the type of organisational change reflected from the metaphors is ‘transitional change’. Marshak [24] maintains that the metaphors and images used for this type of change are related to relocation or move from one to another place. The words used include ‘journey’, ‘dead ends’, ‘obstacles’, ‘desired destinations’, ‘to move’, ‘movement’, or ‘moving forward’. The participants’ drawings and the metaphors used to describe the drawings are congruent with Marshak’s theory. This indicates that the participants (who are junior staff members) viewed the change process as a ‘transitional change’. Interestingly, using the same theory, the result is different in the second group (which consist of middle managers). The findings will be explained in the next section.

3.2 The Retrospective Imaginary Line

Based on the metaphors and images used by the middle managers, they seemed to describe the change as ‘transformational change’. Marshak [24] states that this type of change is described as a change in the state of being, instead of ‘geographic movement’. Indeed, no movement in places or physical journeys appeared in the drawings of the second group. The middle managers referred to the change as a state of being instead of a place. For example, change from a small to a big and clean organisation (Figure 3). A middle manager produced Figure 3, with a line separating conditions before and after the reform. As he was showing his image, he explained that the old tax agency (the small box at the the left of the line) was different from the new one (the big box at the right of the line). He asserted that, in order to achieve the new big tax agency, a firm line should have been drawn before the organisation embarked on the reform.

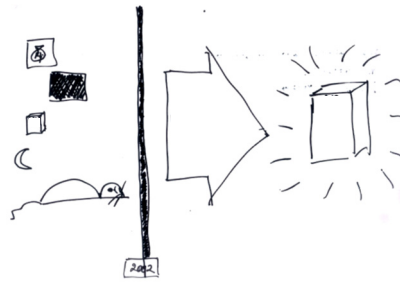


Fig. 3. Drawing a firm line.

The middle managers in Group 2 disagreed when they talked about the 'line' (Figure 3). Some of them expected there was 'a firm line' that divided before and after the change, so that past corruption that emerged after the change would not hamper the change initiative. The other managers viewed the line as 'bleaching'. The 'bleaching' was expected to be done to erase the past wrongdoings so that employees could enter the change with a clean state without burden of the 'past sins'. Thus, the participants imagined the 'line' and 'bleaching' as something that should have happened before the organisation initiated the change. For this reason, this paper names the 'line' and 'bleaching' as *retrospective imaginary* metaphors.

In the literature, there are metaphors that: visualise current or recent change situations [12], [21], describe the desired future [2], and depict the past condition before organisational change [21], or retrospective, but not imaginary. This study contributes to the literature by showing another type of metaphor, i.e., *retrospective imaginary*.

The emergence of retrospective imaginary metaphors in this study, cannot be separated from the context. As Kövecses [13] states, metaphors are closely linked to context. He suggests that context facilitates the interpretation of the metaphors and guides the users in choosing or creating the metaphors. The use of 'line' and 'bleaching' metaphors seem congruent with this theory, especially the importance of context in guiding the choice of the metaphors. In this case, the contexts were corruption incidents, i.e., the emergence of past corruption cases in the reformation era and the arrest of the former leader for his past wrongdoings. Considering the impacts of the cases on the change initiative and the whole organisation and the concerns of carrying the burden of past wrongdoings, the participants imagined the 'line' and the 'bleaching' when describing change and corruption.

In that sense, the middle managers imagined something that could have enabled them to 'break with the past'. This seems related to Bass and Avolio's [25] suggestion that "a symbolic act whereby the organisation makes a clear break with its past can dramatically influence its culture" (p. 115). It could also be related to Lewin's [26] term of unfreezing, i.e. the destabilisation stage before discharging the old behaviour and adopting the new behaviour [27]. The 'line' and 'bleaching' can be seen as the unfreezing phase and a symbolic act to 'break with the past'.

However, the use of retrospective imaginary metaphors indicates the inexistence of the unfreezing phase in the actual change process. Despite this issue, participants reported, both literally in the interviews and metaphorically through images, that the reform has reduced corruption in the tax agency and changed the nature of corruption from systemic into individual. Interestingly, in the drawing, the reform was described as the 'cleanser' and corrupt officers as 'black ducks'. The next section will touch upon

the cleanser metaphor.

3.3 The Cleanser

Different metaphors of change are not just used by different groups, but by different individuals in the same group. The 'journey' metaphor, which represents 'transitional' change, was not the only metaphor used in by Group 1 (the junior staff member). For example, there was the image of 'ducks' which described the change as 'lake water'. It has 'cleansed' the 'muddy' ducks into 'white' ones (Figure 4). This metaphor shows change in the state of being, which if related to Marshak's [24] theory, represents a 'transformational change'.

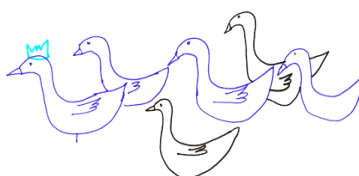


Fig. 4. The ducks and lake water.

The junior staff member who produced Figure 4, depicted the tax officials as black and white ducks. She described that in the past, all ducks looked black because the water was muddy. This description indicates systemic nature of corruption. She depicted the organisational change as lake water, which cleansed the muddy ducks. She described that there had been changes in employees' colour or corrupt behaviour, from muddy to white/clean, indicating a reduction in corruption. However, she acknowledged that black or corrupt employees persisted, showing the persistence of individual corruption. She also highlighted the importance of leaders in the change, as she drew one duck with a crown, leading the other ducks.

Unlike 'journey', 'cleansing' is not a common metaphor used in organisational change literature. The emergence of this metaphor is strongly related to the pre-change internal context, i.e., corruption, which is largely neglected in the change management literature. This pre-change context also explains why despite the inexistence of a 'formal' unfreezing phase in the actual change process, there have been changes in most of employees' behaviour. The interviews data shows that the pre-change contexts, i.e., corrupt working environment in the past and the motives of employees' past involvement in corruption (mostly due to needs instead of greed), play significant roles in the positive change. The corrupt condition caused discomfort feelings, which then triggered employees willingness to change. Based on the findings, this paper supports the notion of the importance of context in the use of metaphors [13] and also in the study of organisational change [28].

4 Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that organisational change is viewed differently by different people, as depicted through the use of diverse metaphors, either at group

and individual levels. The emergence of diverse and uncommon metaphors is strongly related to *context*. This study suggests considering corruption as a contextual background, which has been greatly overlooked in the studies of organisational change management. As Collins [28] has pointed out, context, in addition to an explicit analysis of theory, may help us to 'understand the true complexity of change' (p.x).

In term of research methods, the use of visual methods in this study has provided an alternative way to study organisational change and in particular corruption, which has hitherto been dominated by quantitative methods. Combining multiple methods means gathering different pieces of information, which provide a fuller picture of the phenomena being studied.

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