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## Conceptual Metaphors as Interpretive Tools in Qualitative Research: A Re-Examination of College Students' Diversity Discussions

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### Abstract

In this contribution to the growing literature on conceptual metaphor as a fruitful heuristic for qualitative analysis, the authors re-analyzed transcripts of college student discussions of problematic situations involving cultural diversity and interpersonal conflict. The authors show how they identified metaphorical linguistic expressions and from them derived three conceptual metaphors (life is a journey, the problem is a barrier/maze, and the self is divided) that in turn formed patterns or constellations of meanings in students' problem-solving strategies. As an interpretive tool, conceptual metaphors link certain isolated individual metaphors to these larger patterns of meaning, including ideological frameworks readily available in US culture.

### Keywords

Conceptual Metaphor, Metaphor Analysis, Qualitative Data Analysis, Political Worldviews, Cultural Diversity, and College Students

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## **Conceptual Metaphors as Interpretive Tools in Qualitative Research: A Re-Examination of College Students' Diversity Discussions**

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“She is kind of stuck. . . . She should stand up to him,” a student’s description of a problem at the beginning of the semester. The same student’s description of a problem at the end of the semester,

And it seems as if, you know, her friends want to stand behind her and tell her, “Go ahead and do that; it sounds interesting.” But since most of the students in the class are looking down or don’t really want to get on that topic, they don’t say anything . . . until later. You know, if they were to say something in the classroom [such as], “Oh, that sounds like a good idea, you know; that way we can learn more about it,” then maybe the teacher would [say], “OK, you know, if everybody’s open to it.”

A number of qualitative researchers have used conceptual metaphors and other forms of analogical reasoning as interpretive tools in qualitative research (e.g., Aubusson, 2002; Dexter & LaMagdeleine, 2002; Eubanks, 1999a, 1999b; Moser, 2000; Schmitt, 2000). Moser, for example, argued that they can help researchers identify significant patterns in language that might otherwise be missed, reveal informants’ implicit assumptions about a subject or situation, and make salient the socio-cultural contexts in which conceptual metaphors occur. Such metaphors include more information than is stipulated by a particular mapping. Language users themselves are mostly unaware of their tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) and how it helps to constitute their understanding of ordinary experience. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) put it, “Our unconscious conceptual

system functions like a ‘hidden hand’ that shapes how we conceptualize all aspects of our experience” (p. 13). Not just making claims about the nature of concepts, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors “sanction actions, justify inferences, and help us set goals” (p. 142).

For Lakoff (1993), Johnson (1987), and Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) the crucial aspect of this process occurs not at the level of language itself, but in what they term “conceptual metaphors,” which are formed at the level of cognition through a process of mapping one cognitive domain onto another: That is, “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing [called the target domain] in terms of another [called the source domain]” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Such metaphors allow language users to understand and communicate about complex or abstract ideas in terms of ordinary experiences. Most people use sensorimotor experiences and actions (e.g., standing up, walking, standing still) to develop a schema or gestalt based on “moving through space” that includes metaphorical linguistic expressions, such as *being on the road*, *going somewhere*, *taking a first step*, *avoiding pitfalls*, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> If, for example, this source domain gets mapped onto the abstract concept “life” as a target domain, the result is the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. This is realized in ordinary language in common sense expressions, such as *we better keep moving along*; *she took the less traveled path*; *when the going gets tough, the tough get going*; and *just follow your dreams*. The conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY carries with it a set of unspoken assumptions and their logical relations, what Lakoff and Johnson call entailments. For example, LIFE IS A JOURNEY implies that movement is purposeful and that lives have locations and beginnings, middles, and ends.

Over the span of their research, Lakoff and Johnson have given hundreds of examples of conceptual metaphors that ordinary speakers and writers deploy to describe and communicate their experiences. For qualitative researchers, conceptual metaphors can be critical for understanding the meanings of informants’ descriptions of their lived experiences. Important for interpretation, conceptual metaphors and their connection to ordinary bodily experiences are important for interpreting peoples’ notions of “common sense” (Who wouldn’t want *to keep moving forward in life?*). Conceptual metaphors can bring to the fore assumptions that are culturally shared, but are otherwise implicit.

Lakoff (2002) has also argued that conceptual metaphors regulate the semantic parameters of acceptable and unacceptable discourse: That is, conceptual metaphors are sometimes used ideologically to justify existing power relations by excluding alternative relations encoded in other metaphors. Qualitative researchers have explored similar territory. Deignan (1997a, 1997b) and Santa Ana (1999), who analyzed texts of non-specialized language, and Cortazzi and Jin (1999) and Eubanks (1999a, 1999b), who analyzed natural speech as recorded and transcribed, have found that metaphoric expressions contributed to and reinforced existing power relations. Santa Ana, for example, showed how metaphoric expressions about immigrants, which appeared in print media texts, contributed to a larger racist discourse. In a study of focus group transcripts, about the conceptual metaphor TRADE IS WAR, Eubanks (1999b, p. 437) found that

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we will use SMALL CAPITALS to designate conceptual metaphors and italics to indicate *metaphorical linguistic expressions*.

informants' conceptual metaphors carried "ideological freight" and raised the possibility that their deployment might have been motivated by his informants' prior ideological commitments.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) made a similar claim in *Metaphors We Live By*: "Most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period, but many are imposed upon us by people in power" (pp. 159-160). In *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't*, Lakoff (2002) pushed this argument in an analysis of liberal and conservative patterns of thinking, which, he argues, derive from two common forms of child rearing that are then mapped onto the abstract concept of the state in THE STATE IS A FAMILY constellation of conceptual metaphors. (See Bai, 2005 for a recent account of Lakoff's views.) Identifying conceptual metaphors, then, cannot only show how language users make sense of their lives, but also how social norms condition their thinking and make certain formulations of experience personally legitimate. Finding isolated metaphors is not enough; analyzing the inferential structures that connect them reveals real insights and implicit meanings that would otherwise lie hidden beneath the surface.

This study examines the complex ways conceptual metaphors function in many naturally occurring language situations. We tested conceptual metaphors as interpretive tools by re-examining transcripts from an earlier study of college students discussing diversity issues. After examining the transcripts for metaphorical linguistic expressions (MLE) we identified three conceptual metaphors (LIFE IS A JOURNEY, A PROBLEM IS A BARRIER/MAZE, and THE SELF IS DIVIDED), and then found that these formed a coherent constellation that bound the three in a tighter and possibly more powerful semantic system linked to morality. By constellation, we mean an interrelated set of conceptual metaphors and their entailments that contribute to a meaning system. We also show how, in the process of coding for these metaphors, we unexpectedly discovered that they were interrelated in ways that corresponded to the patterns of thinking identified by Lakoff above. Furthermore, we found that students actually shifted how they deployed conceptual metaphors over the course of a semester, a potentially important insight for an analysis of student transformation (Gillespie & Kochis, 2006).

It should be noted that, in this study, the identification of metaphors and their organization into groups by similarities are independent of Lakoff's theory. That is, a researcher can find metaphors using standard linguistic practices and examine them for patterns, without making claims about their cognitive status. Lakoff's theory does make those claims; under certain conditions cognition becomes structured metaphorically and those cognitive metaphors, in turn, make sense of new experiences. In the first stage of our work, we identified metaphors and grouped them according to standard linguistic practices. In the second stage, we examined our groupings in light of Lakoff's theory.

### **Source of the Transcripts**

The data we analyzed were collected for a qualitative research project conducted at a Midwestern metropolitan college in the mid-1990's (Gillespie, Seaberry, & Valades, 1997; Valades, Gillespie, Seaberry, & Okhamafe, 1997). The original project, in which co-author Gillespie of this article was involved, examined the meanings of diversity for first-year college students as they participated in small group discussions in a one-hour required, but non-graded, communication laboratory. Case stories were utilized to

stimulate conversations about cultural diversity, so that project facilitators could help students further develop their critical thinking strategies in situations where diversity had become salient. At the time of data collection, critical thinking skills were thought of in traditional problem solving categories (e.g., brainstorming), not in terms of language use. The project members were aware of Lakoff's (1996a) work, but did not use it as background for the study. The first edition of *Moral Politics* (1996a) was not yet published.

Research participants were part of a special needs-based scholarship program designed to retain underrepresented students. At the time of the study, 40% of program students were African American; 20% Latina/o, Asian, and Native American; and 40% European American, all demonstrated significant financial need. In contrast, the larger university had far fewer students of color and economically challenged students. During the first two years of their university course work, students took (and still take today) half of their first- and second-year required courses in the needs-based scholarship program and the other half in the university at large. The program has won national awards for its retention of underrepresented students.

Two out of the eight communication laboratory sections were chosen for the study because both researchers could attend and participate as facilitators of the groups. One group was composed of ten students and the other group of eleven students, 50% and 60% of whom were of color respectively. Researchers attained IRB approval for videotaping and audiotaping the discussions. All participants were given the option of moving to another non-research based communication lab without penalty. All students (or their parents, if the participants were under 18) signed consent forms that allowed the researchers to analyze transcripts from audio/video tapes for educational and research purposes. The two groups discussed case stories once a week for eleven weeks throughout the semester. A graduate student observed, took notes, and transcribed the discussions.

The eleven cases that the students discussed had been previously developed from stories that junior and senior scholarship students told in interviews designed to explore the times during these students' first two years when they felt like leaving the institution, times the researchers termed *critical moments*, the title of the project. Under the guidance of a multicultural team, a case writer took central aspects of the students' experiences and rendered them as problems to be solved in five- to seven-page case stories. (For a fuller description of the Critical Moments project see Malnarich & Gillespie, 2004.)

Critical Moments cases describe intense situations for students who feel that their cultural differences are part of a problematic situation. For example, "Annette's Dilemma," the first case students discussed in the communication laboratory, depicts the protagonist Annette trying to juggle conflicting messages about her responsibilities to family, friends, and her own education. In short, she cannot say "no" to demands on her time, and so her grades are suffering. In the last (eleventh) case students discussed, "The First Amendment" (see Henning & Gillespie, 1996 for the case and commentaries on it), Bernadette, a Native American student, wants to research applications of the First Amendment to the religious practices of her tribe, but her professor does not think that there is enough material available for her to do a research paper. In both cases the student protagonists find that their identities are challenged by what has transpired: They feel stymied and misunderstood, and often contemplated withdrawing from the school. Such

cases were compiled into a casebook and used with first-year students who discussed, together, in the communication laboratories, ways to generate creative solutions to the dilemmas faced by their peers. Through learning to problem solve in discussions, students reported that they were better able to strategize when they themselves faced such dilemmas in their educational experiences.

The two researchers of the original project, one African American and one European American, facilitated these case discussions by actively supporting students as they engaged in discussions about the meanings of cultural diversity. Their main pedagogical strategy was to encourage students to see the situations from different perspectives. At the beginning of each session, for about ten minutes, facilitators introduced skills and concepts; then students discussed the case itself for about 35 minutes. It is the transcripts from these 22 case discussions that we re-analyzed for this study.

### **Comments on Methodology**

The earlier studies from this research focused on discussions of single case studies (Gillespie et al., 1997; Valades et al., 1997), while indications of changes across the discussions were noted but not analyzed. The facilitators had also experienced frustration during the early conversations at getting students to shift perspectives. About mid-way through the semester, the facilitators noted that the students began to consider alternative perspectives but did not know why. The present authors decided to re-analyze the transcripts to investigate this change and to use new qualitative research techniques to make sense of them.

The publication of *Moral Politics* was influential to the present co-authors, and both took up the challenge to identify metaphors in the transcripts of this study. (Co-author Kochis was not a member of the original project team.) Once we had each identified metaphors, we created a short list of them. This process is demonstrated in Appendix A, with a sample page from an earlier and later transcript, a sample list of the metaphors extracted from these pages for illustration, and a second list that shows how they participate in the constellation of metaphors analyzed in the rest of the paper. A third linguist, familiar with metaphor but not *Moral Politics*, served as an external reviewer, challenging, especially, moves from metaphor to conceptual metaphor that did not seem natural to the text. By the end of this process, we had identified consistent patterns across all 22 transcripts, but examples in this paper are taken from the first and last two transcripts, to illustrate how researchers can draw out conceptual metaphors from metaphorical linguistic expressions. In this way, we work from the surface manifestations of metaphors to their broader underlying dimensions.

### **How Conceptual Metaphors Work**

In the conceptual metaphor theory, mapping is a crucial cognitive move that language users deploy to make difficult or complex concepts meaningful. For our purposes, the term “conceptual metaphor” means cross-domain mapping, a process in which one relatively accessible conceptual system is mapped onto another. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), this mapping is cognitive, not linguistic. A

“metaphorical linguistic expression” (MLE), on the other hand, is a linguistic manifestation such as a word, a phrase, or a sentence, which in combination with related expressions, functions on the surface as an indication that a conceptual metaphor and its inferences might be operating below. So, in one often used example, the MLEs *shoot down his ideas, defend your position, struggle with that thought*, all imply an underlying conceptual metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR. Furthermore, the power of this theory is that an MLE comes with a set of inferences that implicate hidden assumptions: ARGUMENT IS WAR might imply voice = *gun*, assertive rejoinder = *attack*, contrary ideas = *enemies who must die*. In other words, the theory suggests that there are levels of meaning in qualitative data not fully instantiated on the surface of spoken or written texts.

It should be noted, however, that this does not necessarily imply that meaning is a closed system or that individual MLEs always and simply imply a conceptual metaphor and an attached essentialist reality. We see the strategy of metaphor use as a dynamic and creative way to make meaning. On the other hand, metaphor can also constrain meaning by directing thought. Such powers of metaphor are of particular interest to qualitative researchers, especially when they produce patterns that connect to an ideology (e.g., Eubanks, 1999a). We now turn to a description of the three conceptual metaphors that dominate the student conversations.

### The Journey

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and, especially, Kövecses (2002) have pointed out that LIFE IS A JOURNEY is ubiquitous in US culture. Kövecses, in fact, points to an array of poems (e.g., Frost’s *The Road Less Traveled*), movies (e.g., *The Wizard of Oz*), myths (e.g., the riddle posed to Oedipus by the Sphinx), and songs (e.g., *Stop the World, I Want to Get off*) where the central organizing motif is the protagonist on a life journey. Furthermore, Kövecses aligns the journey metaphor under the PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS metaphor.

We can suggest that LIFE IS A JOURNEY is a special case of the more general metaphor PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS. . . . In other words, a life with a goal or a purposeful life is a special case of having purposes in general. (p. 70)

In the conceptual metaphor of the journey, success is conceived of as getting somewhere.

In the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor a source domain includes experiences of traveling through time and space toward a destination. Language users map simple components of movement toward a destination onto an abstract target domain “life”: *shooting to the top, she seems lost, heading for the last round-up, she’s on her way to success, or we must boldly go where no man has gone before*; or the opposite, of not moving forward: *he’s stuck in the past* or even *we’re losing ground in the fight against poverty*.

However, specific cultures privilege some conceptual metaphors and these, in turn, constrain language users in that culture. In the US culture, for example, moving along on life’s path toward a goal is commonly viewed as being positive. Those Americans who do not move along a path are seen as *stuck, not making progress, unable*



*to stay the course* or *stand up and move things along*. Such metaphorical ways of talking about life are often taken as common sense, so much so that they become normative and operate as a kind of folk psychology. In the United States, by extension, a person who moves efficiently toward an end (i.e., makes progress) is valued as mentally and physically healthy. In other cultures, moving, especially fast, might not be so valued and other features of the journey metaphor might be foregrounded.

### **The Problem**

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) see two major lines of metaphoric conceptualization for problems: the chemical and the puzzle. The first sees problems as dissolved in a solution, which is occasionally disturbed, setting in motion the process of precipitating out a particular problem at a particular time. The goal is then to dissolve the precipitate back into the solution. Problems are perpetual, and (dis)solving a problem is a temporary successful action. They note that this conceptualization is not widely used in US culture. The dominant conceptualization of the problem is as a puzzle that has, like a mathematical equation, a single permanent solution; the fixing of the problem.

Schön and Rein (1994) draw out the larger social implications in US culture of relying on the puzzle as the dominant metaphor of problem-solving, especially the ways in which the very concept of the problem is framed. They distinguish problem setting and problem solving, and arrive at the basic insight that when we examine the language practices “it becomes apparent that the framing of the problems often depends upon metaphors underlying the stories which generate problem setting and set the direction of problem solving” (p. 138). Furthermore, even after one takes what Schön and Rein call “troublesome situations” as problems in the narrow sense, there are still multiple ways of conceiving a problem, though only some will be available in particular cultural contexts. For US culture the problem is commonly depicted as something *broken*, a *lack of knowledge*, a *burden*, or a *maze*, while in other cultures the problematic situation can be configured differently.

### **The Divided Person**

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argue that language users have a complex Subject-Self metaphor system, with a general pattern and several variations on that pattern, all of which arise out of our experiences in the physical and social world, available to be mapped onto the abstract concept Self. The general pattern involves dividing the person into a Subject, “that aspect of a person that is the experiencing consciousness and the locus of reason, will and judgment, which, by its nature, exists only in the present,” and a Self, which includes “the body, social roles, past states, and actions in the world” (p. 269). The Subject is described through essential traits, which are thought to remain unchanging and stable over time: In contrast, the Self is situated and historical.

In one instance of the DIVIDED PERSON, the Self-as-Physical-Object is assumed to be under control of the Subject. The Subject treats the self as an object, a common experience, according to Lakoff and Johnson, who noted that “self-control and object control are inseparable experiences from earliest childhood” (p. 270). The Subject can metaphorically cause action in the self as if “moving an object by force,” as in the

example, “I’ve got to get myself *moving* on this project” (p. 271). In this case the Self is not only objectified, but construed as obedient, and so the Self can metaphorically enact social roles, another way of splitting the Subject and Self.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) also argue that people’s social experiences or roles in the world are mapped onto their conceptions of their own and others’ inner lives. Such possible relationships include: “master-servant, parent-child, friends, lovers, adversaries, interlocutors, advisers, caretakers” (p. 278). Of these Social-Self metaphors, the master-servant relationship, like the Physical-Object Self, contains a forced relationship between Subject-As-Master and Servant-As-Self, where the Subject can command the Self to obey through speech act force; a command, often premised on threat of punishment or blame for not complying.

Language users not only divide themselves, but also divide others, using the culturally available DIVIDED PERSON conceptual metaphor. For example, people often project from their Subject onto the Self of the other, in either an advisory or empathic capacity. One can project one’s own values (Subject) onto another’s Self, as if the other were one’s Self: “If I were you (e.g., your Subject), I would get my ‘Self’ going.” In contrast, one can project one’s more subjective Self into the other’s subjective Self so that one can feel what it is like to be the other’s Self in terms of the other’s experiences. Like the metaphor of Self-as-Object, and Subject-As-Master, and Self-as-Servant, one can make authoritarian projections onto the other.

These three conceptual metaphors, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, a PROBLEM IS A BARRIER/MAZE, and THE SELF IS DIVIDED, emerged from the MLEs of our independent analyses of the transcripts. We now turn to the empirical data in the texts from which the conceptual metaphors emerged.

### **Finding Conceptual Metaphors in the Qualitative Research Data**

Before analyzing MLEs we acknowledge three caveats. First, clearly some distinctions must be made among MLEs that are so conventionalized as to not reveal anything more than membership in the community of English speakers. For example, the expression *a lot* (“She talks about it a lot.”) meaning “frequently” is technically a metaphor, but so pervasive and common in colloquial speech that it would be a stretch to suggest that in realizing the conceptual metaphor of FREQUENCY IS SPACIAL AREA, the speaker was revealing a unique insight about their conceptual organization of problem-solving experience. Our solution was to identify all MLEs in the text and discard those that we judged to be so commonplace as to reveal scant information about the speaker’s or group’s conceptual system.

Second, in keeping the discussion going, the faculty facilitators asked questions that contained neutral metaphors such as *reframing*, as in the question, “Is there any other way that you might frame the problem?” However, during the beginning discussions, students returned to their own ways of talking about the case, regardless of what the facilitators’ language had suggested. We recognize that facilitators/teachers will have some influence in how students conceive of certain problems and their solutions, though, as we discovered, the process is by no means automatic. We argue later that the larger cultural norms of discourse exerted influence on how students participated.

Third, metaphors and MLEs occur not in isolation, but in a context of other linguistic and conceptual devices. For example, some conversations are clearly dominated by modal verbs of commanding and necessity (must, have to, need to) that potentially rival the frequency of metaphor. Such modal verbs are linked to ways that people formulate the nature of authority. However, space does not allow us to explore all the possible links among such devices.

Given these caveats and working independently, we identified MLEs in the transcripts, compared results, and then organized our lists around similar features and entailments, which are particularly important when they contain ideological assumptions that involve fundamental philosophical commitments. For example, as Lakoff (2002) has shown “*leveling the playing field*” (p. 180) entails commitments to fairness and equality of opportunity, as well as a philosophical belief in the social contract and the ability of government to make social reality equally accessible to diverse populations.

We found not only individual conceptual metaphors, but also interrelated clusters of conceptual metaphors that we call “constellations.” As a result of identifying these constellations, we better understood the otherwise invisible social logic that informed our students’ discussions. As we will show, students deployed two different constellations as they described the nature of the protagonist’s journey, the problem and its possible solutions, and the self. After identifying the presence of these constellations throughout the transcripts, we turn our attention to the first and last two case discussions to exemplify our analytic procedures. The same constellations of metaphor were in both the first and second discussions, and in the tenth and eleventh discussions: We draw statements from all four, but use the story lines of the first and last.

### First Conversations

The first striking characteristic of student language in the first conversations was the frequent use of MLEs as an intellectual strategy (*read her mind, in the long run, her mom is being the child, break chapters into sections, carry her family along, to juggle a little bit more, tons of things to do, throw away her relationship*). Falling behind in school, Annette is having trouble saying no to significant others, and the students tried to analyze the problematic situation. The MLEs they used to describe her situation can be organized under the three conceptual metaphors identified above.

#### *The journey*

The students conceptualized getting an education as desired destination. Annette’s problem is that she doesn’t *follow through* on the schedule when she’s *going to study*, and this will have consequences *in the long run*; she should *break the strings . . . and start running* her own life. In fact, a lot of women . . . *paved new paths of life*. The journey comes across as well in relation to her schedule and homework. Being at the library would make it easy for her to *get through* her homework, while *getting through* her schedule made her proud; *In the long run . . . she’ll end up* better off.

However, students deployed the journey metaphor in its absence or lack of movement, as the opening epigraph demonstrates; she’s kind of *stuck*. When the features of the journey that can be appealed to in this conceptualization are foregrounded, an

overriding focus on one part of the journey emerges, namely, the start. Specifically, students contrasted the pre-journey moment before movement begins, with the launching of the journey itself, the “getting going.” In turn, getting going was conceived of as getting into a standing position and starting to move. So, for example, Annette was criticized by the students, who thought she should *not try to hide*, and she didn’t *stand up* to him, because she *doesn’t follow* the schedule, and she *should have come out* and said she can’t help. One student described gender discrimination in similar ways: women *face* it a lot more than men because men *have the guts . . . to stand up and say “No!”* On the other hand, Annette is conceived of as being immobile, below others, in a tight space because she *put herself in that situation*, and, now, she’s *really struggling*, and she is *stuck in a mode* (repeated three times with variations: *what got her stuck* and *stay in that mode* or *it’s hard to get out of that mode*). People are *depending on her* and *she puts everybody else’s needs above her needs, fit[ting] all her needs into one little time schedule*. One student bluntly said, speaking literally, that the solution was for her to “move out” of the house, *leaving the situation*, while others noted that then she would *lose* her relationships. The conclusion is *she’s kind of stuck* and she has let herself *get in that deep*, or *any way she goes, there’s going to be some consequences*. According to one student, *the first step* in solving a problem is stating that you have a problem.

#### *The problem as a barrier*

In the opening conversations, the problematic situation faced by Annette centered on the external demands that pull her away from studying, but simultaneously constitute a barrier. Students converted the problematic situation into a metaphor of her getting somewhere (see above on the JOURNEY metaphor), but this didn’t happen because Annette is not on a straight road to success. She’s stuck in front of barriers that, it turns out, cannot really be negotiated.

The barriers offer numerous opportunities for Annette to exert herself and get going on the journey. Annette should have *come out and said*, she should not *try to hide*, but *it’s hard to get out of that mode*, and *the victim role is hard to get out of*, especially if *you let yourself get in that deep*, and *before she came into that situation*. She doesn’t have options because “you’re forced into *going with society*” or her mother sends *her on a guilt trip*.

The students in their conversations described Annette’s “barriers” as permanent, impermeable, and of her own making. She gets stuck in front of these barriers, and that is like *going against everything*. There is very little that Annette can do to move around them or through them except through her own exertion of will. In fact, MLEs of isolation and immobility dominate the conceptual landscape. In the case study Annette cannot say “No” to her friends, and that creates a barrier; because *she puts her friends first*, she has no choice. The students saw a second barrier, which was Annette’s mother who yells and bangs pots and pans around the house while Annette is trying to study, and who puts demands on Annette that cannot be refused. However, because of finances, “[Annette] can’t really move out.” In fact, for some students *family should always be first*. All of this is hard to negotiate because of *pressure* and *cultural baggage*, which is *some tough shit to carry around*.

### *The divided person*

During their discussion of Annette's dilemma, most students employed the authoritarian cluster of Subject-Self relationships described above, what Lakoff and Johnson (1999) call Physical-Object Self, the Master-Servant Social-Self, and the Advisory Projection of the Subject Projection Metaphor. The majority conceived of Annette as a Subject that needed to get control of her Self, whether as object or child. As one student stated, "[Her family and friends] took control of her and what she was going to do." Since the predominating formulation of her problem was that she is *stuck*, they split her, took the place of her Subject and tried to cause her Self to perform certain actions in order to gain control. To do this, they projected themselves into her Subject position usually as a commanding parent, and, then, prescribed how the Subject could force her Self to carry out actions: *If she puts her mind to it, she could try. She should make a schedule. She should tell people how she feels. She should stand up to him. She should make herself follow a schedule. What she needs to do is move out.* In one instance only, students described Annette as a child in need of a supportive parent: *I think that she needs to talk to some advisor.* The majority of students' statements concerned the need for her Subject to become authoritarian with her Self so that she could get up and move along the path toward her goal. One participant noted, *It just goes right back to the way you place yourself and make yourself.* Another stated, *It's really a matter of making [individual] choices.* In other words, she needs to get her Subject in control of her Self.

To be sure, some students tried to complicate this relationship between the subject and the self. For example, after a student stated, "It was kind of her fault," another student responded, "So telling her, 'You should have done this and you should have done that' . . . [won't solve the problem]. It's kind of hard to expect that of Annette; all of her life it's probably been like that." Another student recognized the inequality in this kind of Subject/Self relationship: "If I coax her into doing [an action], then that makes her a weak person. If I can't coax her into doing it, then I respect her more." However, in the statements that followed these remarks, the students do not pursue such difficulties with an authoritarian formulation of the protagonists' DIVIDED PERSON. In both cases, students quickly return to the metaphors of a weak and passive Self and try to fix it, a strategy, as Lakoff (1996b) noted, that is widely available in the culture: "Our culture tells us that the Subject, our locus of consciousness and reason, *should* be in control of our Self (p. 102).

LIFE IS A JOURNEY, THE PROBLEM IS A BARRIER, and THE DIVIDED PERSON predominated in the early discussions, as we have illustrated in the analysis of the case of Annette. We then turned to the later discussions to see how students deployed conceptual metaphors, if at all. As we worked with the three conceptual metaphors that emerged in the early discussions, as seemingly separate metaphors, we began to recognize, independently, their interconnections with each other, forming a larger constellation and interrelated assumptions about problem-solving. However, before explicating that interrelationship, we turn to our examination of the last discussions.

### **Last Conversations**

#### *The journey*

One striking feature of the last conversations was that the JOURNEY metaphor had almost vanished. Bernadette, the Native American who wants to do a term paper on a Native American subject, though her professor is balking, is not so much metaphorically put on a path toward a destination by the interpretations of the students, but set in the middle of a situation that has levels and perspectives. The JOURNEY metaphor does manifest itself in a few instances: others are prone to *go against* her idea, and her friends want to tell her to “*Go ahead and do that*” which is *going at it the right way*. Indeed, given the ubiquity of the JOURNEY metaphor in American English, it would be quite odd for it to completely disappear.

Nevertheless, we now see the protagonist as not being in the right space to see and participate: she feels *left out*, and she felt she had *to stay in the shadows*, she had to forget about her race in order to be *accepted*, and when she spoke others *just kind of looked down to the ground*. These experiences make her self-confidence *a lot lower*, and scary because [*she’s*] *not on the same level*, and even though she could use her Native family as informants, that would only be their *point of view*. She is struggling to *put it into focus*, to *offer a different perspective*, and to *show the other side of the story*. The goal is no longer a clear destination, but something that is “*open ended at the ending [of the case],*” that is, a decision is not simply *arrived at*. In contrast to Annette who is stuck in a hole of her Self’s own making, Bernadette is depicted as being in a complex space historically and socially constructed. This has implications for how the students constructed the problematic situation.

#### *The problem is a negotiable maze*

In the last conversations the original PROBLEM AS A BARRIER conceptual metaphor, with its main entailment of a single solution, like the original simple journey, has given way to a different set of entailments. The set includes a more complex problematic situation that does not necessarily have a single solution that fixes the problem once and for all. Instead of the single destination and one correct pathway with immovable, impermeable obstacles, we have multiple perspectives and possibilities that must be *processed*. As we will also see in the revised DIVIDED PERSON metaphor, the problematic situation is created by all participants, and all participants must engage in the resolution.

Instead of the original *stand up and charge ahead toward the goal*, we now have a situation of someone already standing and looking around for pathways out. She must *see* the possibilities or imagine what others might *see*. For one student the problematic situation is caused by the fact that the professor *never looked into it* or thought Bernadette couldn’t *bring any new insight into* the topic. To another student, the professor is not a barrier (like Annette’s family): Problem-solvers must consider *what his perspective was*, and that he just wanted her . . . *to focus on* the topic. Indeed, given the multiple points of view, the dominant metaphor is *of seeing by being in someone else’s shoes*, that is, of looking at the problematic situation from another angle to gain a better perspective. One student even sympathized with the professor and concluded, “So maybe I’m just thinking that’s what the professor was thinking.”

For Bernadette, though she is in a *tight* situation, she is *in very good standing*. Others might not understand Bernadette because they are *not on the same level*, and if she used her parents as informants she would only know their *point of view*. In solving her

problem of writing the paper, she has options instead of prescriptions; she could *ask others* or *look up somebody* or *go to the library*. Some of her friends who are trying to help are *pushing at it* [the problematic situation] *from a different point of view now*, and others that have the Indian *background* will begin *to see* [her predicament]. The students saw that Bernadette herself is *trying to offer a different perspective* and wants to offer the *other side* of the story. In a sense students were stepping back in the process of problem definition and focusing more and more attention on “problem setting” a la Schön and Rein (1994). Students now conceive of problems not as barriers, but as a matter of definition that requires a social mechanism, much closer to a maze metaphor, (i.e., a problem is a maze that one must *process*, with *feedback*, and though progress can be stopped, it is not by being in the way, but by a *lack of understanding* of the options available to Bernadette and intentions of others involved in the problematic situation). To grasp what the professor was doing, one must know what his *perspective* was. Students acknowledged their own perspectives as well: *That’s how I saw it* and *maybe* [how] *I frame thoughts*.

### *The divided person*

In the last two case discussions, the students still used the DIVIDED PERSON conceptual metaphor to discuss the case protagonists, but the internal relationships among MLEs shifted from authoritarian to egalitarian ones. The social relationship between the Subject and Self changed from commanding parent-child to friend-friend or advising parent-child. Students explicitly recognized the need for nurturance and compassion between the Subject and Self. From the students’ perspective in the later discussions, nurturing the Self becomes a precondition for facing the problematic situation. This is a reorientation from the earlier authoritarian perspective, in which the only option is a prescription to get the protagonist *back on track* toward a clearly defined goal.

Instead of focusing on weaknesses in the protagonists, the students pointed to the inability of the secondary characters in both of the cases to understand what was happening to the protagonist. They portrayed individual characters as needing to *open up* in order to understand: *he didn’t try to understand where she was coming from*; *I don’t think [he] sees*; *it’s just hard for him to see things and he’s not open-minded about it*; and *it seemed like he wasn’t putting himself in her shoes*. These metaphors of seeing broadly were stated more explicitly by this student: “It’s not ‘feel sorry for,’ it’s ‘empathy’; that’s the question. [The character] doesn’t have any empathy.” The students tried to give the protagonist the perspectives of the other characters: “All three of these people ... are missing one thing. ... None of them are correct or none of them wrong.” The students frequently used seeing/not seeing or recognizing/not recognizing as metaphors for understanding.

The shift from authoritarian Subject-Self relationship to the advising and friendly Subject-Self is significant, as the students were now trying to aid the protagonist rather than blame her. The students become a friend, rather than an authoritarian parent, to the protagonist, actively projecting friendships as a way to *stand with* them, as the opening quotation demonstrates. The students end that opening quotation by saying, “And that way, [the Indian and White students] can all educate everybody together.”

In the last discussions the students configured LIFE IS A JOURNEY, THE PROBLEM IS A MAZE (no longer a BARRIER), and the DIVIDED SELF differently than they did in the first discussions. Like the first set, we also saw interconnections among conceptual metaphors in the second set that led us to posit the existence of two different constellations. The journey ceases to be a straight path, the problem ceases to be a barrier, and the divided self loses its authoritarian nature. In the discussion that follows we talk about the implications of this change, including the ideological assumptions they project and the potential power of this approach for the interpretation of qualitative data. Our argument here is not that conceptual metaphors directly instantiate a psychological reality, but that they can be used heuristically to reveal possible interpretations and understandings.

### **Discussion**

As we analyzed the transcripts and discovered three dominant conceptual metaphors, we also found that these metaphors were, through their entailments, interconnected with each other, and formed a new unit that we have termed a “constellation.” It is in the constellation that the power of conceptual metaphors actually resides, i.e., the interdependence of the conceptual metaphors makes the constellation self-reinforcing, particularly resilient, and resistant to change. When the students conceived of the problem in the cases as a Self-constructed barrier in the path leading to a clear goal at the end of a straight road, then the only possible solution for the stuck protagonist was to have Annette’s Subject make her Self stand up on her own two feet, charge the barrier, and break through to arrive at her destination—problem solved. In placing themselves in the case the students took the role of bystanders and limited their problem-solving to modeling how Annette should command her Self to get the job done. By the end of the semester the students’ constellation of conceptual metaphors had changed. The students conceived of the problem as a multi-layered maze that needed to be grasped from multiple perspectives, which the students provided in their role as collaborators with Bernadette. They recognized that, instead of a simple, clear solution, a reasonably good outcome had to be negotiated among the all those involved in the problematic situation.

The two constellations of interrelated conceptual metaphors used by the students are suggestive of Lakoff’s (2002) analysis of THE STATE IS A FAMILY. Lakoff argues that in US political culture two idealized forms of family life are commonly projected onto the state—one based on the morality of strict father parenting and the other on the morality of nurturant parenting. These different models implicate certain moral understandings and ways of moral reasoning, in that each way of parenting in a family has very differently structured sets of interrelated assumptions that make them logically coherent, cohesive, and morally viable. Although we do not have space to draw out all the implications of the changes that occurred in students’ deployment of metaphors, we found close approximation in the early discussions to the strict father model and in the ending discussion close approximation to the nurturant parent model. We conclude with a brief description of the system of interconnected inferences that bind them as worldviews and suggest the potential power of this type of analysis to reveal those worldviews.

In the strict father view of morality, physical stamina, including the ability to keep in an upright position, is used to convey moral strength. For the students in the early



discussions the protagonist's barriers are provocatively similar to Lakoff's description of evil. Being tough and standing up to evil, for example, are projected onto morality as in the following MLEs: He is morally *upright*, or he is an *upstanding* citizen. People who are weak morally are unable to stand up, so that being bad is *being low*. In this conservative view, strength is needed because the world is a cruel, tough, competitive place where good people must fight against evil through hard work and self-denial. Evil is an actual force that must be fought against. Since it is an active force that can knock one down, one must persevere against evil—stand up to it. One becomes morally strong through self-discipline and self-denial. Someone who is morally weak cannot stand up to evil, and, so, will eventually commit evil; therefore, weakness is a form of immorality. Important to note here is that one can “not empathize with evil” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 74); it needs to be attacked and brought down. A strong system of rewards and punishments needs to be in place, a kind of tough love, to shape morally decent behavior.

The strict father framework assumes literalness in language and thought in order to eliminate ambiguity that might lead to indecisiveness. In the early discussions the students prescribed actions, as if Annette could clearly understand the command and carry it out. Lakoff noted that, in the strict father view, a system of rewards and punishments can be clearly stipulated and then received and understood directly. Authorities are respected because they serve as enforcers of the moral system, assuring evil will be punished (or knocked down) and good promoted and protected. A system of straightforward rules that clarify what is right and wrong is often assumed possible, so that language can be taken as a means for establishing an objective reality, available for anyone to internalize without effort. Once internalized, the rules specify appropriate behavior across all possible situations.

In contrast, the metaphor system for the nurturant parent model of the family begins, not with control and strength, but with care taking. In this model, evil is not a living force in the world. Instead, evil lies in situational dynamics that lie outside the control of particular individuals and limit or stunt their growth and development. To understand morality, the nurturant parent depends on empathy, which includes full understanding of the situation and the individual's potential to achieve well-being. If one understands the situation, then one knows how to support people so that they can realize or actualize the moral potential that lies inside them. The empathic person believes that “if you really feel what another person feels, and if you want to feel a sense of well-being, then you will want that person to experience a sense of well-being” (Lakoff, 2002, p.114). Conditions that foster growth (rather than a system of punishment and reward) are necessary for moral development.

Lakoff's THE STATE IS A FAMILY metaphor provided a theoretical framework for understanding the two patterns of students' responses to the problems in the cases. Their early commitments to authoritarian and individualistic interpretations of the cases were not easy to track in the immediate context of their lively, free-flowing interchanges. Only in retrospective analysis of the transcripts do the otherwise seemingly disparate comments become linked to a series of interrelated assumptions that appeared as common sense to them. As Lakoff's theory shows, this version of THE STATE IS A FAMILY metaphor is readily available, embedded in US culture. The nurturant parent metaphor is also available culturally, but as Lakoff has argued, it has been overshadowed by the predominance of strict father metaphors in the culture at large.

In identifying constellations of conceptual metaphors, researchers must take care not to let the dualism in Lakoff's theory overshadow the complexity of their data. His two versions of THE STATE IS A FAMILY metaphor are heuristics that expose patterns of thinking available in the general culture. It would be a mistake to claim that the students in the discussions were using these metaphors deterministically or mechanically. It could be that the students, meeting as strangers in the early discussions, drew their language practices from a worldview that they perceived to be generally acceptable to society. However, even then, any worldview is contextual and historical. Not only does the Strict Father constellation have a history in the dominant culture that dates to the Puritans, but its revival in the conservative resurgence of the 1990s also made it particularly available at the time the students' discussions took place.

The richness of qualitative data affords researchers the opportunity to explore the ways in which metaphors are used in ordinary, everyday contexts to shape meanings and actions. Also, according to conceptual metaphor theory, when shifts in constellations of metaphors occur, a transformation in thought, in cognitive functioning, occurs. From this view, in changing their metaphors over the course of the semester, the students accomplished something significant and, perhaps, radical.

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. It can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 144)

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## Appendix A

Key: Italicized portions indicate metaphorical linguistic expressions; parentheses indicate conventionalized metaphors not included in analysis; small caps on right indicate conceptual metaphors identified.

### Sample Text from Early Transcript

### Examples of Conceptual Metaphors

Student 1: She should *stand up* to him.

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

Student 2: *In the long run* she's going to *end up* resenting these people. And it's not their (*fault*). I mean she should have *come out* and said, "Listen, I can't do it tonight. I've got two (*big*) tests. I'm really sorry. You'll have to go without me." She should talk to her mom and say, "Mom I've got all this to do. Could we please just go out with your boyfriend another night or something. I just can't do it." And when she just keeps saying yes, yes, yes all the time, they're not *psychic*, you know. They can't *read her mind*.

PROBLEM IS A MAZE  
(PUZZLE)

Student 3: But if she has something planned . . .

DIVIDED SELF

Student 2: But she has something planned. She needs to get something done. If she just keeps saying, "yes," they figure it's O.K. They can't tell that she's really *struggling*. So I mean she should tell people how she feels and not *try to hide* . . . um . . . her feelings, because they won't not know. And *in the long run*, she'll *end up* resenting them.

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

Student 3: I think they—if they care about what she thinks and, uh, you know, about her feelings and things, they should, you know let her be, you know, what she wants to do and (*stuff*). Cause I mean if they don't, I mean friends don't *push you* or *pressure you*, you know, to do something you can't, you know? So, it was just *up to Annette* to say, to that she's going to be studying. That she can't help them, you know. But Annette's problem was she didn't *stand up* you know. She didn't say that she needs the time to study. She should say no.

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

### Sample Text from Later Transcript

- Student 1: Well, no, I'm just saying maybe that's what his *perspective* was. Cause I know that I myself, when I was writing a paper on recidivism, I had an extremely (*hard*) time just given how (*broad based*) that subject is trying to find some *avenue to bring something new*, it was almost impossible for me. So, maybe I'm just thinkin' that's what the professor was thinkin'.
- SELF AS FRIEND  
PROBLEM AS  
NEGOTIABLE MAZE  
LIFE AS JOURNEY
- Student 2: I thought the professor *did a good job*—of what—I mean maybe should could've did a little better but I mean she didn't have a good understanding or he didn't have a good understanding of what she wanted to do her project on and to immediately say yes, that might *mislead* the student to do something that would be so *far off* of what he wanted that it's gonna (*hurt*) her grade. So, basically he said, "Meet with me," you know, "after class."
- POINT OF VIEW  
LIFE AS JOURNEY  
SELF AS SUPPORT  
POINT OF VIEW
- Student 1: And then that would *put it into focus*.
- PROBLEM AS  
NEGOTIABLE MAZE
- Student 2: Yeah. That way it takes less class time and you can *move on*.
- Student 3: Now that I think about it, my situation was actually was very *close* to this because my topic was very (*broad*) and our teacher after we write our paper and turned it in, she asked us what do we have the most difficulty in a I wrote that the most difficulty I had with writing my paper which was a similar subject was trying to *condense* it. And I was successful at doing it and I think may—a concern of this teacher could be that if Bernadette fails at trying to accomplish what she's doing you know that it's not gonna *work*.

### Conceptual Metaphors (Modified)

Point of view

Point of view

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