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Centring participant voices through metaphor in employment relations research

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ABSTRACT

Metaphorical concepts shape our thoughts, actions, and communication in everyday life. A rich network of metaphors underlies employment relations theories, framing our understanding of work and employment. This article urges employment relations researchers to use metaphors not just in theory, but in empirical data collection. Metaphor elicitation methods offer insights beyond what can be gleaned using traditional methods, such as interview, alone. Using the context of research into youth non-standard employment, this article proposes that through incorporating methods such as metaphor elicitation, employment relations research can uncover greater depth of experience, and empower workers who may lack voice or power.

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Introduction

Research methods in business and society research tend not to empower nor offer voice to marginalised participants in the research process (McCarthy and Muthuri 2018). McCarthy and Muthuri (2018) call for the use of methods which can be used to do research with the voiceless, and to tackle 'wicked problems' (complex, difficult to solve problems). They promote the use of visual participatory methods because they are inclusive of participants regardless of literacy or language barriers, allow participants to share what cannot be vocalised (for example due to social constraints), and enable reflection on complex problems. In other words, methods are needed in business school research which offer alternative ways to include the voices of ordinarily voiceless or silenced groups, to highlight their experiences and discuss the complex problems those participants often face. This also applies to employment relations research, where research design considerations rarely include how to centre the voices of groups of workers who are often voiceless in their workplaces and in society.

The research methods we use are relevant not only for increasing participant voice through and within research, but for empowering participants in their daily lives. McCarthy and Muthuri (2018) suggest that visual participatory methods 'may begin

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a process of reflection and empowerment that could later bring about larger changes in societal dynamics' (p. 156). In other words, methods which trigger reflection can empower participants and potentially lead to social change. This perspective acknowledges that research participants are people and workers first, before they are sources of data, and will return from research participation to face the problems we study in their daily lives. Several authors have highlighted the need to broaden what we consider as being research impact (Aguinis et al. 2014; Wickert et al. 2021) – however they stop short of considering the impact of the research process on participants, and how this could be folded into research design.

This paper explores the benefits of metaphor elicitation for employment relations research with workers. It argues that eliciting metaphors directly from participants offers a powerful tool for employment relations researchers to gain deeper insight into workers' experiences, and empower workers by centring their voices in the research process. Metaphors are highly relevant to both how we understand and experience our world (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), and when we become conscious of these metaphors and explore new ones, we can focus on previously unacknowledged or less-understood aspects of our experiences (Cuervo and Wyn 2014; Lakoff and Johnson 2003). Metaphor elicitation methods bring these understandings of metaphors into empirical research, providing ways for research participants to reflect in new ways on their experiences, using existing and new metaphors. Gaining insight into the previously unvoiced or unacknowledged is key to employment relations research that aims to uncover inequality in work and employment and empower workers. The following section begins with a more detailed exploration of what metaphor is and why it is relevant to employment relations research. Following this, metaphor methods and the use of these in employment relations research are outlined. The final part of this section discusses the potential benefits of elicited metaphor methods for employment relations research. The chapter then turns to illustrating how eliciting participant metaphors enhanced the research findings in a study with young workers in non-standard employment in New Zealand (Ewertowska 2020). This latter section focuses on the strengths of the method, evidenced by examples from the research findings provided. Lastly, a discussion of how the elicited metaphor method can improve employment relations research is provided.

Metaphors and their relevance for employment relations

A metaphor describes one concept as another concept, borrowing features from the second concept to give insight into the first (Morgan 1998). Conceptual metaphor theory explains that there are core 'conceptual metaphors' that structure people's cognitive understandings, thoughts and actions – and therefore also their communication (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). These are labelled 'conceptual metaphors', because they, at least in part, structure the concepts we live by (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). In other words, conceptual metaphors are fundamental to how we understand and experience the world (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). The metaphors used to communicate conceptual metaphors are systematic – made up of systems of related metaphors, termed 'metaphorical entailments' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003).

The use of metaphors to describe work and employment are common in daily life and society. For example, non-standard employment is commonly referred to as

a 'stepping-stone' into standard employment, or a 'trap' that leads to cycles of unemployment and non-standard employment (Watson 2013). These metaphors fit into a broader conceptual metaphor that we use to frame how our lives change over time – of *life as a journey*. In the stepping-stone metaphor, non-standard employment provides a path between school, and standard full time, permanent employment in a career – in other words it is a transitional phase between youth and adulthood. In the 'trap' metaphor, non-standard employment prevents a smooth transition, prolonging the 'stage' of insecure work for youth. Metaphors such as these are used by stakeholders such as researchers, policymakers, and workers themselves, illustrating the primacy of metaphors for understanding, framing and communicating about work and employment.

Metaphors have therefore been embedded in industrial relations and employment relations theories. For example, Dunn (1990) highlights the metaphors underlying industrial relations as a discipline and diffusing its theories. The pessimism of the 'trench warfare' metaphors of the 'old industrial relations' are contrasted with the new more hopeful 'pioneering journey' metaphors of human resource management, which emphasise commitment and growing into social conformity (Dunn 1990). However, Dunn's 1990 discussion of the metaphors which underly employment relations and industrial relations theories has sparked debate (Dunn 1991). Morgan (1998) notes that just as with all theory, metaphor-based theories are fallible, as they 'can create powerful insights that also become distortions, as the way of seeing created through a metaphor becomes a way of not seeing' (p. 5).

Indeed, empirical research has highlighted where our theoretical metaphors do not work and different metaphors are needed. For example, the panopticon metaphor – which explains that where workers are constantly watched they will internalise managerial control – has failed to account for resistance by call centre workers (Barnes 2004). Similarly, Cuervo and Wyn (2014) argue that metaphors of youth as transition commonly used in research have been problematic because they hide young workers' efforts to build a sense of belonging (Cuervo and Wyn 2014). Morgan (1998) advocates for using new metaphors in the world of organisations and management 'to find fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations that we want to organise and manage' (p. 5). Different metaphors highlight and offer understanding of different aspects of workers' experiences, and thereby may lead to different policy and management approaches (Cuervo and Wyn 2014; Schön 1993). These discussions of our theoretical metaphors demonstrate the value of researchers cycling between theory and practice to develop 'more authentic' theory (Boyer 1996, 23) – while simultaneously acknowledging that metaphor is central to much of our theory.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain that the metaphorical concepts we live by can hide aspects of what we experience in the world: 'in allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g. the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor' (p. 7). Similarly, Charteris-Black (2004) points out that 'metaphors are usually influential because they persuade us of certain ways of viewing the world' (p. xii). Lakoff and Johnson (2003) suggest that while we live by conceptual metaphors, these metaphors do not fully or totally map onto the concepts they shape. New metaphors can shed light onto experiences governed by existing conceptual metaphors, even if they do not change or replace

those existing metaphors we live by (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). Given that the metaphors we use can focus attention on some aspects of our experiences and away from others (Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Morgan 1998), metaphor methods are relevant to uncovering different aspects of people's experiences, thereby improving our knowledge and theories about the world around us.

Metaphor methods and elicited metaphors

The primary metaphor methods are projected metaphors, metaphors-in-use, and elicited metaphors (Seung et al. 2015). Projected metaphors involve metaphors being generated or projected by researchers onto empirical information, often following data collection (Cornelissen et al. 2008). Metaphors-in-use involves identifying metaphors used naturally in speech or writing (Cassell and Bishop 2019), and this method can be applied to empirical data such as interview transcripts or using secondary documents. Projected metaphors and metaphors-in-use are popular because they offer the opportunity to shed new light on existing datasets (for example see Tracy et al. 2006), by bringing to light the nuances of experience and emotion that figurative language communicates (Lee 2018). In other words, they can act as triangulation methods that do not require new data collection.

Tosey *et al*. (2014) propose a more deliberate method – within phenomenological research – that elicits metaphors during data collection. Their approach is for the researcher to use language as devoid as possible of metaphors, so that participants will use only their own natural metaphors. Similar to Tosey *et al*.'s (2014) method for invoking metaphors-in-use, elicited metaphor methods are built into the research design. In elicited metaphor, the researcher explicitly asks participants to identify or create metaphors to describe something they have experienced (Low 2015). In contrast to Tosey *et al*.'s (2014) method, this form of elicited metaphors are not metaphors that the participants or the researcher would naturally use, but are instead asked for by the researcher to prompt participant reflection and creation. Just as projected metaphors and metaphors-in-use can be used to strengthen the, elicited metaphors can be incorporated into research design as a form of triangulation, enhancing the depth of insights gathered through traditional methods, such as interviews, observation, and qualitative survey questions (Turner and Wan 2018).

Elicited metaphor is frequently used in education research, with metaphors elicited through interview questions and drawing and writing prompts (Seung et al. 2015). Most often, participants are prompted to create their own metaphors from scratch, for example a written prompt might read as, 'A teacher (student or classroom) is like a . . . [participant metaphor writing space]' (Seung et al. 2015, 46). Comparatively few elicited metaphor studies have provided participants with a central concept from which to start their metaphors (Grünberg and Matei 2020; McCarroll 2017) – both studies explore workers' experiences within their professions. Grünberg and Matei (2020) included both a writing and drawing prompt in their study, asking nurses to use the concept of animals to create metaphors about their family and work lives. For example, one of their prompts was 'If my workplace was an animal, it would be . . . because . . . [drawing space]' (Grünberg and Matei 2020, 294). McCarroll (2017) used a unique drawing method where the researcher verbally guided the participants through a drawing of a house, with prompts to write

down metaphors on each area of the house. For example, one prompt was 'looking at the house of FM, you look around to the neighbourhood it is in. What do you see? Who are the neighbours of FM?' (p. 297). In brief, while education research has favoured metaphor elicitation methods that begin with participants creating metaphors from scratch (Seung et al. 2015), research with workers has offered an additional approach where the researcher provides a starting conceptual metaphor for participants to work from (Grünberg and Matei 2020; McCarroll 2017).

Commonly for both metaphors-in-use and elicited metaphors, analysis is based on conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), and conceptual metaphor analysis (Cameron and Low 1999). The collected metaphors are categorised or grouped by their underlying conceptual metaphors, and then metaphors are analysed within their groupings to identify patterns and develop understanding of participants' experiences (Cornelissen et al. 2008; Turner and Wan 2018). However, in a review of elicited metaphor in studies with teachers, Seung *et al*. (2015) identifies other common methods of analysis as constant comparison, analysis using education-based theoretical frameworks, and thematic analysis.

Overall, metaphor methods offer an 'incremental' rather than radical shift in research design (Lê and Schmid 2022). Simultaneously, they can provide in-depth information – Cassell and Bishop (2019) note that metaphors provide a large amount of information within a small amount of data. Moreover, metaphor methods are methodologically flexible – metaphors can be used with a range of methodologies, including case study (Kalfa et al. 2018; Seung et al. 2015), phenomenology (Alarcón et al. 2015; Grünberg and Matei 2020), and discourse analysis (Cameron and Maslen 2010). Given the flexibility of metaphor methods, Wan and Low (2015) advocate for their use in other disciplines, beyond education research where they are common. However, few studies in employment relations have taken advantage of metaphor methods.

Metaphor methods in employment relations

Where metaphor has been used in employment relations, it has generally involved metaphor-in-use and projected metaphors, as opposed to eliciting metaphor from research participants. For example, using projected metaphor, Harris *et al*. (2013) discuss female academics' experiences of mentoring and progression through the fairytale of Cinderella, highlighting the roles of patrons and fairy godmothers. Similarly, Kalfa *et al*. (2018) frame academics' resistance to managerialism using Bourdieu's game metaphor, highlighting that those who have bought into the game are less likely to resist. Pasquier *et al*. (2020) apply a flashmob metaphor to union mobilisation, pointing out that this "opens up new theoretical perspectives for considering unions' collective action in industrial relations" (p. 358). Cassell and Lee (2012) identify metaphors used in interviews by union leaders involved in education initiatives, finding metaphoric descriptions of their different roles as change agents – for example as engineers, nurturers, and strategists. They note the part that metaphors play in individual sense-making, and the consequent influence of metaphors on decision making by change agents (Cassell and Lee 2012). In other words, affirming that metaphors are used to understand the world around us, and therefore influence action.

Workers' own metaphors are rarely gathered through metaphor elicitation – we are not aware of other employment relations research which has done so. Elicitation methods have, however, been used in relevant management and careers research – such as in the studies noted earlier which used animal and house metaphors to explore career identity and work-life balance (Grünberg and Matei 2020; McCarroll 2017). In another relevant example from the management literature, Cassell and Bishop (2019) elicited taxi drivers' metaphors of what it is like to be a taxi driver, asking them 'If you were to choose a metaphor for what it is like to drive a taxi what would you choose?' (p. 197). Their findings included that the customer relationship is central to taxi drivers' work, and that taxi drivers describe themselves as unsung heroes and agony aunts (Cassell and Bishop 2019). Cassell and Bishop (2019) highlighted that the metaphors created by taxi drivers enabled access to detailed information about how the drivers made sense of or understood their experiences. These studies allude to the valuable insights that incorporating metaphor from the outset could provide in employment relations research.

The potential benefits of elicited metaphors for employment relations research

While a broad range of research methods are used in industrial and employment relations, few utilise multiple methods (Whitfield and Yunus 2018). Whitfield and Yunus (2018) advocate for employment relations researchers to use multiple methods to overcome issues with each method, and triangulate and improve the depth of research findings. While involving only an incremental change to research processes (Lê and Schmid 2022), elicited metaphors invite deliberate, deep reflection on experiences and expression of emotions (Grünberg and Matei 2020; Lee 2018), offering nuanced information that can both enhance participant voice, and the depth of data from interviews.

The sections above discuss the importance of awareness and engagement with the metaphors that underly theory and people's working lives, for the ongoing development of employment relations practice and theory. At the level of industries, occupations and careers, workers themselves are surrounded by and engaged in metaphor development (Inkson 2004; Morgan 1998). Just as existing metaphors in the world of work are both shaped by, and shape workers and their movements, participant-created metaphors have the power to shape participants' perspectives and actions. Cassell and Lee (2012) highlight the ability of new metaphors to not only to develop new understandings of our experiences, but also to spark action. Elicited metaphor methods can therefore empower participants, as they offer an opportunity to explore new ways of thinking about problems, new perspectives, and potential actions (Schön 1993). Fitzpatrick and Farquhar (2019) note 'the power of a well-placed metaphor to disturb our sense of reality' (p. 6), explaining that the disturbance created by new metaphors enables re-imagining of our world.

Elicited metaphor methods privilege participant perspectives and are therefore appropriate for doing research with groups who have less voice or power, such as young workers as in this study. Elicited metaphor is gives voice to participants as they deeply reflect on, make sense of, and analyse their own experiences in an exploratory way (Grünberg and Matei 2020). Creating metaphors can enable participants to make sense of their experiences and reflect on their beliefs (Fitzpatrick and Farquhar 2019; Morgan

1998; Schön 1993). Wan and Low (2015) suggest that elicited metaphors are particularly useful where participants have not previously thought in-depth about their experiences.

Metaphors also support communication about emotions, because of the abstract nature of both emotions and metaphors (Kövecses 2003; Lee 2018). Indeed, metaphor-in-use studies have highlighted that through metaphors, workers can reflect on and articulate difficult to voice feelings and thoughts about their experiences. For example, Smollan (2014) highlights how metaphors reveal the emotions that people feel during change management processes, finding that their interview participants often 'resorted' to metaphors to convey negative emotions. Similarly, Tracy *et al*. (2006), in a study of people's feelings following workplace bullying, found that metaphors enabled participants to share 'difficult-to-articulate, and devastatingly painful feelings associated with workplace bullying' (p. 171). In those studies, examples of the highly emotive metaphors included participants feeling like they were drowning (Smollan 2014) and being tortured (Tracy et al. 2006). Using imagery, metaphors can therefore be used to share the complex, difficult to communicate details of emotional experiences – including the affective, behavioural, and cognitive aspects of emotion (Fussell and Moss 1998; Lee 2018). Eliciting metaphors may therefore provide vulnerable workers with greater voice to share the emotive aspects of their experiences.

By increasing participant voice, elicited metaphors have the potential to resonate more honestly with people's experiences, compared with the metaphors which are developed by researchers to support theory, and those projected by researchers onto existing data – as has been prevalent in employment relations research (Harris et al. 2013; Kalfa et al. 2018; Pasquier et al. 2020). Incorporating participant-created metaphors into theory development could lead to more 'authentic' theory by enhancing the voices of worker participants – one way of tackling the challenge set for business school academics by Boyer (1996). More authentic theory can support researchers in the endeavour to 'become more vigorously engaged in the issues of our day' (Boyer 1996, 23), with research that is responsive to the issues that workers face.

Methods

This section provides context for the elicited metaphor method used in this study, and then the following section focuses on how this method enhanced the research. The research sought to explore young workers' experiences of non-standard employment in New Zealand. Mirroring a global trend, young people form the largest group in non-standard employment in New Zealand (Hipp et al. 2015; Peiró et al. 2012; Smith 2018; Statistics New Zealand 2019). However, minimal research has been carried out to examine the experiences of young workers in non-standard employment in New Zealand, with only a few studies carried out with student populations (Beban and Trueman 2018; Richardson et al. 2013). The study used Thorne *et al*.'s (2004) interpretive descriptive methodology, focusing the research on describing and interpreting participants' experiences, so that the information gathered can be used to improve practice. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in 2019, with 12 young workers aged 21 to 24. Interviews explored their past and present experiences in non-standard employment. Metaphors were elicited during semi-structured interviews, towards the end of the interview.

Each participant was asked to describe their experiences of non-standard employment in terms of a house metaphor, so that the house provided a central organising concept for participant metaphors. The metaphor question asked 'If your experience of non-standard employment was a house, what sort of house would it be? How would you describe that house?'. As described earlier, providing a starting concept like the house is an unusual method in elicited metaphor (Grünberg and Matei 2020; McCarroll 2017). However, this elicitation method offered participants a clear, but flexible space to reflect on and question their experiences of employment (McCarroll 2017). Similarly, Grünberg and Matei (2020) noted that creating metaphors based on animals enabled their participants to reflect on the taken-for-granted metaphors shaping their lives, as they re-described their experiences. Moreover, providing a starting metaphor could also overcome difficulties that participants may have in coming up with metaphors (Wan 2012).

The decision to use the specific concept of a house was made for three main reasons. First, participants were intimately familiar with the 'starting' metaphor of the house, and housing is socio-culturally situated. This offered participants the ability to draw on their own past experiences and cultural contexts surrounding housing. Second, houses come in infinite variations, enabling imagination when describing non-standard employment as a house. McCarroll (2017) point out that the house metaphor is highly useful for eliciting metaphors, as 'the "house" as a built structure is also familiar in terms of universal imagery, allowing its application to expand to future applications to other organisational disciplines' (p. 294).

The third and most significant reason was that for youth in non-standard employment, the relatively fixed metaphor of a house juxtaposes with the transition metaphors usually used to describe non-standard employment (Watson 2013). Cuervo and Wyn (2014) advocate for new metaphors that move away from youth as transition, and instead build on youth as belonging, to highlight the relational and social aspects of youth (Cuervo and Wyn 2014). For example, when given the opportunity to move beyond the conception of youth as transition, young workers in Cuervo and Wyn's 2014 study focused on their belonging to suburbs and communities; their belonging with family and friends; and belonging to their time as a shared experience of their generation (Cuervo and Wyn 2014). The house metaphor similarly invited participants to move beyond temporary or transitional framings of their non-standard employment. For example, using the house metaphor to describe employment resulted in participant reflection on relationships with employers and their roles in participants' 'houses' – houses are inherently relational places where family and friends gather, they involve relationships with landlords or banks, with neighbours, and even contractors or tradespeople.

Given that participants were provided with the starting metaphor of a house, the decision was made to use thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019), rather than following a process of identifying and analysing metaphors by their underlying conceptual metaphors (Cornelissen et al. 2008; Turner and Wan 2018). Using participants' terminology, the house types that participants described were: state house, meth house, middle-class suburban, temporary apartment, DIY do-up, and slum. Supplementary Table 1 provides each participants' metaphors with a summary of their work background, grouped by house type.

After the house types were identified, initial codes were created by identifying underlying experiences communicated through the house types and features of the houses, for example 'life is messy and unstable' and 'at mercy of landlord/employer'. The interview data was coded, and initial themes developed, followed by a process of comparing the metaphor

and interview data, codes and themes. The comparison started with noting any experiences that were apparent in the metaphors but not apparent in interview data, and identifying whether themes from the interview data were present in the metaphors. Where the interview themes were apparent in the metaphors, analysis explored how the metaphors related or added nuance to the themes, and which aspects of non-standard employment experiences were emphasised by participants. The metaphors were also placed alongside short summaries of participants' past and present work experiences, to identify meanings in the metaphors that might be specific to participants' individual contexts and work experiences. After this comparative stage, themes were finalised, incorporating both the interview and metaphor data. The findings section below explores how incorporating the elicited metaphor method enhanced the research findings.

Findings: Strengths of the method – magnifying workers' voices through elicited metaphor

The findings sections below describe how the elicited metaphor method magnified workers' voices, enhancing the research findings. First, the extreme representations participants used in the metaphors emphasised aspects of their experiences that were most important and difficult for them. Second, participants were empowered to express their anger towards their employers. Third, the metaphor question had participatory elements that enabled participants to analyse their experiences and reframe non-standard employment. Finally, the deeper reflection prompted by the metaphor question resulted in more nuanced research findings. Each of these voice-enhancing aspects of the elicited metaphor method is explained below, and illustrated with examples from the metaphor analysis.

Extreme descriptions foregrounded new and salient aspects of non-standard employment

Participants used extreme or exaggerated descriptions of their houses, with vivid sensory imagery (imagery that stresses senses, such as touch), to emphasise the aspects of non-standard employment that most significantly affected them. The metaphor question enhanced participant voice in the research process by enabling them to shift focus to aspects of non-standard employment that were salient for them personally. In contrast, the interview questions directed participants to talk about specific aspects of their experiences, and without the extreme visual representations that metaphors enabled. As a result, the metaphors brought to the fore experiences of non-standard employment that are less commonly highlighted in empirical research, including issues of mistreatment and trust.

The metaphors emphasised the severity of participants' experiences of mistreatment – such as wage theft and verbal abuse – using extreme sensory imagery. For example, James emphasised the suffering he experienced due to mistreatment by his employer, with his house being 'very cold and very damp and quite not pleasant to be in'. James' metaphor of a DIY do-up house communicated a strong sense of hopelessness, describing his house (employment) as 'everything bad, nothing works'. Kurt explained that like a state house, being in non-standard employment 'starts off quite nice. And then as you go into it, you get drained, and dragged, and beaten.', and that he was 'like a six or seven-

year state house now. I am beaten. There's probably meth addicts living in me'. Studies on non-standard employment have generally not revealed or focused on experiences of mistreatment and illegal practices, although, there is, for example, evidence of poor treatment such as that experienced by young hospitality workers (Mooney 2016) and interns and apprentices (Bakkevig Dagsland et al. 2015; Einboden et al. 2021).

The metaphors also emphasised that participants did not trust their employers to provide good working conditions – this trust was eroded because employers deliberately chose not to fix issues with participants' employment and work conditions. The houses – symbolising participants' employment conditions – were run down and neglected – 'the grass is 20 feet tall' (Isla), and 'it's all falling apart' (James). This was also evident in the DIY do-up houses, as Emily explained 'it's easier to not fix it'. Isla explained her lack of power and her employer's distance from her working conditions: 'And they're – Yeah, we'll fix that pipe. But it's not like we have a landlord that you can make come. It's Housing New Zealand and they suck, sometimes'. Research on trust in non-standard employment is scarce – as in employment relations literature more broadly (Brandl 2020). Non-standard employment research tends not to move beyond theorising that employers are likely to distrust workers because their employment is temporary (for example, see Fleming 2017). The metaphor findings in this study highlight that trust for non-standard employment is affected by what is seen as deliberate neglect or unwillingness to improve conditions by employers. This exemplifies the benefit of introducing 'new' methods into employment relations research in order to reveal the depth and extent of those experiences.

In addition to offering new findings, creating metaphors was empowered participants to take control of the narrative about non-standard employment, reimagining non-standard employment as they experienced it, and communicating the severity of their experiences through these extreme representations. The meth house metaphors illustrate this – a 'meth house' is a house occupied by people addicted to methamphetamines (meth), and for the occupants their addiction controls them and can be life-destroying. One participant related the experience of an addict to not having control over their hours, for example, to describe how overwhelming this was: 'just everything's going off. You don't know what's going to happen' (Ava). Participants therefore took full advantage of the control offered to them in the metaphor method to re-describe non-standard employment in new and jarring ways.

Participants were empowered to express anger towards their employers

Through the metaphors, participants were also able to openly criticise, shame, and express their anger towards their employers. As noted earlier, metaphors have been found to be used by research participants to share negative emotions (Smollan 2014; Tracy et al. 2006). Metaphors enable expression of emotions because of the shared abstract nature of metaphor and emotion, and the imagery inherent in metaphors that can communicate complex aspects of emotion (Lee 2018). Significantly for this research, Duffy (2017) argues that young people's anger is policed, with their anger framed as immature, childish, and counter to advancing their wellbeing. Anger focuses attention on perpetrators of injustice; preventing sharing and expression of anger can remove motivation for taking action (Duffy 2017). This highlights the importance of enabling young workers to express their anger when recounting workplace

experiences, as it could motivate them to take action against injustices in future. Research participants can feel pressured in interview settings to provide socially desirable answers (Bryman and Bell 2011), and for young people this may include pressure to avoid expressing anger, given the social policing of their anger (Duffy 2017). In this research, metaphor methods filled this gap, with the young research participants using the metaphors to express their anger, and highlighting aspects of employer behaviour that provoked their anger.

Participants expressed their anger through the metaphors by shaming their employer, or insulting their employer to show they did not respect their employer and to reduce the employer's worth or image. For example, Ruby focused on her employer in her metaphor and used the house metaphor to paint her employer as a 'really dark, boring apartment', and sharing that 'I have no good feelings towards them'. Ruby's labelling of her employer as dark and boring painted them as insignificant or unimportant – empowering Ruby to take her own 'stab' at her employer after their discrimination based on her depression. In comparison, Ruby's non-metaphorical descriptions of her employer during the interview were generally factual explanations of events and practices. In the interview she rarely directly shamed or criticised the employer, for example commenting, 'I felt a little bit disrespected, I guess' and on their employment practices 'it's different, that's for sure'.

Participants also expressed in their metaphors that it was not just poor working conditions, but employers' unwillingness to improve working conditions that made them angry. For example, participants emphatically criticised their employers for being ineffective in responding to complaints for example as William explained, 'Like a tenement, it'd be terrible. It's God-awful. They screw up about as much as they can without the Labour Department being called in'. Emily and Isla used the metaphors to shame their employers for not caring enough to provide good working conditions, 'They just put a few buckets there, y'know. They don't really care about the quality of the house' and 'hey don't care about the people who live there' (Emily), and 'And the grass is 20 feet tall. And they honestly just don't care anymore' (Isla).

Participatory elements of metaphor enabled participants to reframe non-standard employment

A significant benefit to asking the metaphor question later in the interviews was that it enabled participants to take a step further from describing their experiences, to conceptualise their experiences of non-standard employment overall. A common thread across the metaphors was the overall dysfunctionality of non-standard employment. Participants described non-standard employment in terms of the worst sort of houses they could think of – state houses, meth houses, slums, and do-up houses that were falling apart. In the interviews, participants described the different aspects of their experiences in detail, however, the metaphors tied this together with an overall image of non-standard employment being a house completely falling apart around its occupants. Using a more traditional interview question to ask participants to sum up or describe their experience overall could be difficult for participants to respond to in a deeply reflective way. Moreover, summarising participants' experiences may be seen as a task for the researcher to carry out during data analysis – to identify or develop the overarching themes within and across participants' experiences. The metaphor question was, therefore, unique in

enabling participants to describe their experience overall, moving them into a more agentic role in the research space where they could analyse their own experiences.

The use of elicited metaphor, based on a house, provided participants with a platform to reframe the problem of non-standard employment. Participants' metaphors communicated non-standard employment as being a systemic, social problem. This is a shift from the transition-focused metaphors which describe non-standard employment as a trap or stepping-stone (Watson 2013). Viewing non-standard employment as a temporary problem or a stage affecting some workers, fails to consider that more systemic, fundamental change is needed. For example, a meth house is 'contaminated' with harmful chemicals – affecting the walls and carpet, the furniture, and any occupants living there. This metaphor has a shock factor, and participants' use of it highlights the unnatural, unhealthy, and almost criminal nature of their employment conditions – hinting at a broken system of employment. Moreover, there has been talk in New Zealand media about the 'meth crisis' in New Zealand (Johnston 2019) and referring to a meth house could also be interpreted as participants understanding their non-standard employment as part of a wider problem or crisis. Similarly, William used a slum metaphor, inferring a sense of the rules or norms of civil society not applying to those in non-standard employment, just as those who lives in slums have been failed by social and political systems. These examples demonstrate how eliciting metaphors while utilising a starting metaphor, can support participants to reframe the issues they face in work and employment.

Enabling participant reflection through metaphor added depth to the findings

The metaphors offered nuanced insights into participants' experiences, adding depth to the findings. As noted by Grünberg and Matei (2020), metaphors offer an exploratory method for research participants to reflect deeply, make sense of, and analyse their own experiences. As a result, the metaphors offered information about participants' experiences that were not apparent through the interview data.

The metaphors provided a stronger sense of how pervasive the feeling of lack of control in non-standard employment is for young workers. In the metaphors, their employers – as the landlords – had near complete control over what sort of house participants were in, and the condition their house was in. In contrast, in the interviews, participants' experiences of control generally focused on their lack of choice over being in non-standard employment, and their employer's over working times.

The metaphors also revealed more about participants' underlying perspectives on non-standard employment in terms of its place in adult working life. While it was clear from the interviews that participants were not happy with the conditions in non-standard employment, the metaphors made it clear that participants saw these as abnormal. The exaggerated or abnormal features of the house metaphors spoke to the abnormality of non-standard employment conditions, highlighting that participants did not normalise these. For example, even in the middle-class suburban houses, where participants generally had better work conditions in terms of pay and hours, the houses featured 'twisted stairs' (Charlotte) and a 'basement bigger than the house' itself (Lily). In terms of the overall findings of the research, this is important because there is some debate in the literature over whether non-standard employment has been normalised by young workers. Previous research has noted that young workers are aware of the negative life impacts

of non-standard working times (Mrozowicki 2016). However, contrary to previous research findings with young workers in non-standard employment (Moore et al. 2018), the participants did not normalise their non-standard working times, nor their lack of control over those working times. In sum, participants' elicited metaphors unveiled different perspectives of non-standard employment that have not emerged in previous research using more traditional methods alone.

Discussion

The research findings demonstrate how enabling workers in employment relations research to generate their own metaphors can provide significant insights into their experiences. This section discusses the four ways in which using elicited metaphor within semi-structured interviews enhanced the research findings. These included that 1) participants used extreme representations to highlight the important aspects of their experiences; 2) they expressed their anger towards their employers; 3) they reframed non-standard employment as a social problem rather than a transition; and 4) participants were able to deeply reflect on their experiences, producing unique research findings.

First, the extreme representations participants used in the metaphors emphasised aspects of their experiences that were most important and difficult for them. Participants used the metaphor question as an opportunity to stress the more significant negative experiences they had in non-standard employment, such as mistreatment. This aligns with findings that workers use metaphors as an outlet for describing difficult to express and emotional experiences at work (Smollan 2014; Tracy et al. 2006). The metaphors used by participants involved similarly extreme representations as in those studies. However, the findings in this paper differ in that participants' metaphors involved new metaphors as opposed to metaphors used in natural language, and creating new metaphors enabled participants to create shocking and vivid sensory images of non-standard employment. These findings support Fitzpatrick and Farquhar's 2019 point that metaphors can disturb our realities – participants used the metaphors to try to disturb the reality of how non-standard employment is viewed, using shocking representations.

Second, participants were empowered to openly express their anger towards their employers, criticising and shaming them, and highlighting aspects of their employers' behaviour that were anger-provoking (such as not caring enough to improve work conditions). As noted earlier, metaphors offer an opportunity for empowering voiceless or powerless workers. Metaphors enable participants to express emotional experiences because they allow for the abstract nature and complexity of emotions (Lee 2018). In this case the opportunity to express anger was important, given that young people's anger is policed (Duffy 2017).

Third, the metaphor question had participatory elements that enabled participants to reflect, analyse their experiences and reframe non-standard employment. Elicited metaphor magnifies participants' voices by giving them the opportunity to analyse their own experiences, privileging their perspectives. Participants' reframing of non-standard employment as a social problem, as opposed to a transition, advances a new way for researchers to understand non-standard employment. This finding supports the argument that eliciting participant metaphors can enable researchers to move from theory to empirical data, and back

again – to develop more authentic theory and better tackle the issues of our day (Boyer 1996). As highlighted by Cuervo and Wyn (2014) and Schon (1993), offering different metaphors for problems can lead to more complex understandings of people's experiences, and thereby can influence how social problems are approached. Participants were able to use their metaphors to rise to the challenge posed by Cuervo and Wyn (2014), to shift our conceptualisations of youth away from transition. Participant-created metaphors can therefore inform employment relations researchers on how we can improve on the conceptual metaphors we use to understand and frame problems for workers.

Finally, the deeper reflection prompted by the metaphor question resulted in more nuanced research findings, with the metaphors containing rich information in small data chunks (Cassell and Bishop 2019). In this study, the metaphors revealed new insights that were not unearthed through traditional interview questions, and not highlighted in existing non-standard employment research. For example, participants were able to share how pervasive their sense of lack of control was in non-standard employment, and to highlight the abnormality of non-standard employment. This demonstrates the insights that can come from prompting deeper participant reflection on experiences, beliefs, and feelings through elicited metaphor (Fitzpatrick and Farquhar 2019; Schön 1993; Smollan 2014).

Although overall, the elicited metaphors provided insight and access to information not otherwise available, there are two key recommendations from this study for applying elicited metaphor in employment relations research. First, elicited metaphor questions, their explanation, and the interview questions surrounding them, need to be carefully planned and piloted prior to use (Cairns-Lee et al. 2022), with strategies prepared in case any participants struggle with the task (Wan and Low 2015). While the house metaphor was, in part, intended to make it easier for participants to create metaphors, two participants experienced confusion with the task. One participant provided metaphors focused on organisational culture and physical workspaces, as opposed to his experiences of non-standard employment. Another participant struggled to provide a metaphor and asked, 'I'm not good at that, could you prompt me?' (Greg). The researcher offered the example of the state house provided by two previous participants – Greg then chose to use the state house metaphor for both his previous and current jobs. These issues affected the usefulness of the findings from these two participants' metaphors.

A second important consideration is the placement of the elicited metaphor question in interviews – in this study there was a danger that the metaphors could mirror the interview question data because the metaphor question was asked later in the interview. However, placing the metaphor question later in the interview alternatively meant that participants' experiences were fresh in their memories – they had immediately prior recounted details of their experiences across their previous jobs. Participants were able to describe their experiences of non-standard employment overall using the metaphors, while highlighting aspects of non-standard employment that were salient for them personally. However, metaphor questions could be placed earlier in interview transcripts, particularly if the interviews relate to more recent experiences. As Wan and Low (2015) suggest, elicited metaphors can be useful for enabling reflection where participants have not had an opportunity to think in-depth about their experiences.

Conclusions

Overall, metaphor elicitation methods offer workers alternative imaginary spaces for deep reflection and making sense of their experiences (Fitzpatrick and Farquhar 2019; Grünberg and Matei 2020). The novel elicited metaphor method outlined here gave participants the opportunity to experience and understand their non-standard employment in a new light. This led to new insights on workers' experiences of non-standard employment, and potential avenues for developing more authentic research and theory (Boyer 1996) that aligns with how non-standard employment is experienced by workers. By stepping outside of the common conceptual metaphors that structure people's experiences, we can uncover previously unseen or unacknowledged aspects of those experiences (Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Morgan 1998). Participant-created metaphors could offer different ways of thinking about and responding to some of the significant problems we see in employment relations today – for example, challenges to occupational identities, ongoing discrimination in female-dominated industries, and perhaps even dwindling union membership.

The elicited metaphor method also empowered participants, for example by enabling them to reframe non-standard employment, and focus the research on experiences that were important to them using extreme representations. This is particularly useful for research with workers who ordinarily lack voice or power – enhancing their voice in research processes by offering alternative ways to share and deeply reflect on the complex issues they face (McCarthy and Muthuri 2018). Participant-created metaphors therefore offer a practical tool for employment relations researchers to make an incremental shift (Lê and Schmid 2022), towards utilising more participant-driven data collection methods.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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