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Dancing in a red dress: Empowering metaphors of academics' experiences of the manuscript peer review process

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ABSTRACT

The peer review of journal article manuscripts is a complex and emotionally fraught process. This article draws on how 25 academic authors used metaphor to describe their experiences of manuscript peer review. A critical analysis of these metaphors provided insight into the structures, relationships of power, and their emotional impacts. Over their careers, some academics reconceptualised their metaphors more powerfully to describe their evolving experiences and confidence over time. Their metaphors repositioned their sense of power within the reviewer/ reviewee binary. We discuss how these reconceptualisations could guide new authors to manage feelings, thinking, and actions during peer review. This research makes an original contribution by extending the exploration of how metaphors and their reconceptualisations build emotional resilience. Academics new to publishing may gain a greater sense of empowerment while navigating the peer review process, reduce the negative emotional impacts, and prevent the resulting loss of valuable research.

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Introduction

The academic manuscript peer review process is enacted through language. However, negative impacts of poorly communicated reviewer feedback are felt across publishing academics and there is increasing concern about the impact of negative reviews on particularly vulnerable groups such as post-graduate students and early career researchers (Lee et al., 2022; Silbiger & Stubler, 2019). This is because 'Language is such a powerful vector for carrying perceptions, intentions, behaviours, values, and more insidiously, ownership, power and exclusion' (Mercer-Mapstone & Mercer, 2017, p. 140). Language is used in ways that form discourses around how the review process is perceived and enacted. Power in discourse is exercised both *in* specific conversations and *behind* the wider social order that constructs the nature and power relations of these encounters. 'The idea behind "power behind discourse" is that the whole social order of discourse is put together and held together as a hidden effect of power' (Fairclough, 2015, p. 83).

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In terms of a specific encounter in which power plays out *in* discourse, Fairclough (2015) described ‘gatekeeping encounters’ as exchanges in which the gatekeeper belongs to the socially dominant group and controls the encounter to determine whether someone else gets access to the sought-after goal. Likewise, in the peer review process, the reviewers and editors act as the gatekeepers while authors must follow the prescribed conventions to obtain a publication. Authors must become knowledgeable in the prescribed discourses (often tacit) constituting the peer review process. This can structure a one-sided exchange in which much of the power is hidden by power holders (Fairclough, 2015).

The peer review process is one of the academic binaries. Others include: rational/irrational, arts/sciences, and students/teachers. Binaries divide groups into two oppositional and hierarchical subgroups in which one group is dominant over the other. Distributions of power are not permanent as those in power must work to preserve it and those less powerful can seek more (Fairclough, 2015). Critical theories deconstruct and destabilise these binaries. Domination and oppression within educational practices should be deconstructed and critiqued (Freire, 1972). Examples of this deconstruction include how power relations between males and females are challenged by postcolonial and radical feminists (Freire, 1972; McDonald & Coleman, 1999; Mercer-Mapstone & Mercer, 2017). The Students as Partners movement disrupts traditional boundaries between teachers and learners (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Jensen & Bennett, 2016). The reviewer/reviewee power dynamic is also coming under scrutiny (Hammond & Lemon, 2022).

While the peer review process is now undergoing critical scrutiny aiming at improving the quality of feedback and how it is communicated (Chong, 2021; Hammond & Lemon, 2022), widespread change in the culture of peer review will likely take time to achieve. Therefore, a more immediate focus is needed on how academics experience the peer review process and how to lessen the negative psychological impact.

Current initiatives of communication are aiming towards greater empowerment of authors by including conversations between authors to share experiences. Literature now explores how academics experience the peer review process and how to support others. For example, Chan et al. (2021) called for more research on how authors build resilience to handle rejections. Dynel (2020) described how academics can receive psychological relief through social media by reading unprofessional comments by reviewers that are recontextualised as humourous on the *ShitMyReviewersSay* (@Your-PaperSucks) Twitter account. By posting unprofessional comments in a public forum, recipients turn the tables of power on the reviewers. Furthermore, authors can feel less isolated in the experience as they see comments even experienced academics receive. A participant in Gravett et al.’s (2020) study said, ‘I believe that sharing our own failures and how we have overcome them is more transformative for the academics with whom we work than examples of “best practice”’ (p. 656).

Metaphor in peer review

Metaphors are a creative use of language when a word or expression about an object or action is applied to different objects or actions to imply a similarity between them. For example, previous research has described the experience of peer review in terms of positive and negative metaphors. Conceptual metaphors have included: peer review as a game (Gravett et al., 2020), peer review as hostility, or peer review as education (Jackson et al.,

2018). Sword (2017) found academics have given metaphorical accounts of their writing practice as positive (e.g., going on a journey, doing magic, or producing a remix tape), neutral (switching gears, having a conversation, or playing tennis), and negative (e.g., drowning or wading through a valley of shit). However, metaphors are not just linguistic constructions or embellishments; they also can include pragmatic (way of persuading) and cognitive (way of thinking) aspects. Changes in metaphor can indicate changes in the conception and the creation of new ways of understanding. ‘If metaphor can influence the way we perceive a certain social reality, then it is a potent and potentially powerful weapon’ (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 23). This conceptualisation of metaphor as a weapon offers authors greater agency in framing and experiencing the review process. Furthermore, metaphors can offer competing discourses of review that can be shared socially to compete with current discourses of hierarchy and exclusion. Creative or novel metaphors can give new understandings to experience that offer guidance for action (Charteris-Black, 2004; Hughes et al., 2021; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In psychological literature, the use of metaphors offers clients new perspectives by considering making new associations to guide change (Ferrari, 2020).

Rationale

There is a lack of interventions to deal with rising stress in the academic workforce in Australia and New Zealand (Lee et al., 2022). They called for prioritising the promotion of wellbeing through multiple initiatives of communication and workplace practices and support. Communication practices can be examined through language use and how it constructs the academic binary reviewer/reviewee relationship. Theory suggests metaphor can offer academics a path to transform their conceptions of the peer review process and thereby mitigate negative impacts. Previous research identified coping strategies with metaphor used by academics; however, these strategies focused on the metaphor as the end point and did not show how metaphors can change across time from the earlier experiences. Therefore, we investigate how successful academics have conceptualised their earlier experiences and then how they reconceptualised them later in their careers. In this way, we explore a strategy of construction and reconstruction of metaphors. Through this reconception, we can illuminate the metaphor construction as a process to navigate it with less distress and a greater sense of empowerment. The findings could inform the development of resources for less experienced academics to conceptualise the peer review process to empower them with understanding and navigating their own emotional responses and the subjectivity they take up.

Methodology

We see language as a social practice. It contains a relationship between the language generated and the situational, social, and institutional structures that shape it, and which the language, in turn, shapes. Language therefore reflects and creates what is known, identities, and interpersonal relations. In doing so it reflects and maintains the power dynamics contained within those social relations, but also has the potential to transform through new ways of representing objects and people’s relative positions (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Thus, we are interested in how language, through metaphor, is used by publishing

academics to represent their experiences. We take a critical stance in our analysis as our aim is not only to understand how academics represent their experiences through language but also to develop critical knowledge of how unsupportive power dynamics function within the realm of academic publishing and create awareness and greater agency in current and future academics to support their needs (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). We refer to Fairclough's (2015) description of power in which participants with power are '*controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants*' (pp. 75–76, italics original). He refers to these overlapping constraints as what is said or done, the relationship between the discursive partners, and the subject positions they occupy. This manifestation of power in language shaped our research in studying the use of language to represent and construct the experience of the peer review of manuscripts. In particular, metaphors enable the expression of potentially emotional experiences in a less threatening way. This may be useful when developing workshops for less experienced researchers to begin making sense of and constructing more positive views of themselves as authors. Previous research stated that participants can use metaphors to work with their feelings, assumptions, and behaviors in a less-threatening way to develop reflection and self-awareness (Nardon & Hari, 2021).

Method

Recruitment

We recruited participants through an advertisement included in a non-related general notice sent to the faculty-wide e-mailing list in November 2021. Recruitment information included the information sheet, the interview questions, and a request to contact the authors if they wished to participate. The inclusion criteria were having a minimum number of five publications as we considered that sufficient to provide enough experience of peer review over time. This relatively low number aligns with Green's (2021) description of authors being experienced enough to become reviewers if they had published three articles over the last 10 years. Secondly, participants needed to feel they had a better management of their emotions during the peer review process currently than they did when they first started publishing.

Participants

The participants were 25 academics from our institution in Aotearoa New Zealand. There were nine professors, five associate professors, ten senior lecturers, and one lecturer across a range of disciplines including: health, science, sport and recreation, education, hospitality, and engineering. Sixteen participants were female while nine were male. Two of the males and two of the females identified as Māori (indigenous). Participants estimated peer reviewed publications of a minimum of 12 with some in excess of 100 articles, with a group average of approximately 50 publications.

Interviews

Following university ethics committee approval (ref. 21/350), we conducted, recorded, and transcribed the interviews online using Teams. One interview was recorded on

Zoom and transcribed by Author2. The interviews ranged in duration from 28 min to 1 h and 18 min, with an average of 51 min. The focus of the interviews was about how academics managed their emotions during the peer review process. A part of this was the question asking about how they could describe their peer review process as a metaphor in terms of what it was like when they started publishing and then how they would describe it as a metaphor again currently. This is the focus of the current analysis. Pre-reading of the interview questions gave them time to consider their metaphors. Most gave metaphors easily which may have already existed in their minds or developed out of the discussion from the preceding questions. The few who struggled had unconsciously used them earlier in the interview, so we reminded them of that.

Data analysis

Our analytical technique aims to identify the types of metaphors used by academics to describe their experiences of being peer reviewed and to explore how these metaphors may have changed over time as academics developed the management of their emotions. Within this change, we aim to identify how these metaphors position the speaker in terms of power relations within the peer review process and how this position is changed in the reconceptualised or extended metaphors. We examined our data from the perspectives of critical metaphor analysis and critical discourse analysis to achieve these aims. Critical discourse analysis aims to understand and explain complex social phenomena by revealing how it is shaped through discourse. This is then used to create action for change (Fairclough, 2015). We describe our analytical steps below.

Metaphor identification

We developed our metaphor identification based on the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Schmitt (2005). We read the texts together to identify candidate metaphors and then compared these with Schmitt's (2005) criteria. We identified metaphors following the process described by Schmitt (2005, p. 834):

1. A word or phrase can be understood beyond its literal meaning in its current context.
2. Its literal meaning comes from an area of physical or cultural experience (source area).
3. Is transferred to a second, more abstract, area (target area).

An example of this would be a participant's use of the term 'obstacle course' during the interview when no physical obstacle course is present. The term is based on the original source as a potential game or challenging journey with physical obstacles. This is applied to the target area of peer review in which the meaning of the physical obstacles is transferred to the peer review process as a set of challenges along a journey.

Theme identification

We entered relevant metaphor text extracts into an Excel spreadsheet. We also included an analytic memo note column. We collated the metaphors into lists of the descriptions of initial peer review experiences, and current descriptions of the experience. Some metaphors may have become conventionalised for certain speakers (Charteris-Black, 2004), for example, the peer review process has been described in other research as 'a game'

(Chan et al., 2021). We looked for metaphors (either conventional or novel) with a transformative element to them that initially positioned the academic as less powerful and transformed them into a more powerful position. This could occur through either the transformation within the initial theme of the metaphor or a change to a new metaphor. Some participants appeared to be aware of this transformation by making confident comparisons between their earlier and later experiences within their initial metaphors or in their choice to change to a new one. Others described their metaphors more slowly with less confidence and may not have been consciously aware of the way their metaphor positioned them within power relationships. We used a deductive analysis in that we expected some conventional metaphors to appear, and we used an inductive analysis to identify specific text that described other metaphors and entailments. Then we grouped identified metaphors thematically around central organising concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2020, 2022).

Critical discourse analysis

From our list of transformative metaphors, we critically examined the language used that demonstrated relative positions of power between reviewer and reviewee. We considered direct mentions of power or vocabulary associated with power and how these might transform subject positions and actions (Fairclough, 2001). For example, as we read each metaphor, we examined how the participants positioned themselves in relation to other actors (people or objects) in the metaphor.

Findings

Analysis of the use of metaphors showed that of the 18 participants who used transformative metaphors, nine transformed within their original theme, and nine transformed through the introduction of a new, more empowering metaphor. The other seven did not use metaphor in a transformative way but still used metaphors that depicted power imbalances. The mechanisms of power evident in the metaphors used by academics included space, role, routine, social-linguistic distance, power imbalance, and exclusion. We present the four metaphors that best illustrate how power relations played out: playing the game, changing costumes, cooking, and overcoming physical challenges. These contained a transformation of power relations in which the participants repositioned themselves in the power dynamics of the peer review process. These are summarised along with other metaphors in Table 1.

Playing the game – ‘We can be destroyed by the process (or) we can just get with the game.’

Game was one metaphor used to describe the peer review process in a range of ways (see Table 1). Game elements included: risk, winners and losers, unfairness, tensions between players, and luck. Participant 25 described ‘the academic game’ as ‘a bit of a lottery’, ‘a gamble and there are some loaded dice’ and that ‘the white middle-class guy who knows his way around the system’ has privilege and more money to use. He summed this up as, ‘So some of the game elements are the knowledge’ and that peer review is

Table 1. List of participants' metaphors by category.

Category	Metaphors
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grilling, undercooked • Cooking to feed your people • Following the recipe to bake a cake • Using a colander to rinse spaghetti to improve the quality • Global club sandwich where people get eaten/consumed • Sausage machine rapidly churning out lower and lower quality sausages
Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Game, good game • Game of chess • Formulaic, rules • Rollercoaster – ups and downs • Fight, battle, not game, Kung fu the opposition • Academic game, bit of a lottery, gambling with loaded dice • A violent children's game involving death (oranges and lemons) • The white middle-class guy who knows his way around the system
Attire /costume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leather jacket as a shield • Boy wearing someone else's constrictive costume to a man walking along the road who has put a heavy load of bricks on his back • Constrained white dress to a flowing red dress with a big swirly skirt
Physical challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running a first marathon when untrained to becoming an experienced marathon runner where experience normalised • Climbing a mountain range, no longer surprised by further big peaks • Climbing a wall where many handholds are missing to handholds appearing and becoming more obvious as people help so climb gets easier and faster • Exercise, physical pain making you stronger • Paddling upstream to going downstream and letting current do work for you • Rough and tumble with siblings • Not a level fight or playing field • Impossible physical challenge, slow swimmer trying to chase a fast boat
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh seedlings, food chain, ecosystem • Nature and organic, nourishing garden compost or someone destroys with chainsaw • Spiritual journey moving up levels of understanding • Bumpy road with police throwing down nails • Mysterious obstacle course, decipher the hidden enemy, go into the forest • Skilled wizard risking becoming Voldemort • Good versus evil, necessary evil • Being a mechanic • A vulnerable medical procedure • Dialogue or marriage • Bank of experience

'not a level fight'. Participant 21 compared the process to a mystery obstacle course and Participant 7 to a children's game involving death.

You know running the obstacle course I mean. There's definitely some level of mystery around the peer review process. It's not just an obstacle course because like an obstacle course you would know that there are the obstacles I gotta get over. There's a kind of a sense. It's kind of hidden, it's subterfuge. It's kind of behind the keyboards, anonymous and so I think, I think rather than the obstacle course. Maybe that's subsequent. Once you got your comments, then it's like those people get through these little different hurdles. (21)

There was a children's game in the UK ... oranges and lemons and you have to go through and it's chip chop and you get your head chopped off. That's a little bit like the peer review

process. You get through and you're great, and you'll have a great time, and you win the game, but otherwise you'll get your head chopped off and you're out. But you have to then do what kids do in the playground as they pull themselves together and play again. So that's my metaphor. Don't go home and cry, you just got to keep going at it. (7)

In these metaphors, the academics occupy less powerful positions as they are excluded from viewing parts of the process that are 'shrouded in mystery' or risk getting one's 'head chopped off'. Systems of value are not determined by the academics but by institutions, funders, and publishers.

Another way the peer review was described was as a fight. In general terms, the process was mentioned with the word 'fight'. Participant 7 said, 'Because I'm always fighting' (to get more creative research included rather than just confirm to narrow check box lists the reviewers have). Participant 24 said, 'Maybe there's some kind of metaphor around there that the handholding submissiveness of the process at the beginning, versus "No, I'm gonna fight."' Other participants mentioned the peer review process as a game with enemies and biases, but some potential for fulfilment if played well.

Initially, I guess it's trying to decipher the hidden enemy. You're outside the forest and you've got to go into the forest. You actually don't know the way, and actually you don't know where the end is either. (8)

You can take it down the Road of Embitterment [...] or you can take it – There's something more going on here that I need to understand So it's almost like a journey of fulfilment and it seems that you get a higher-level understanding and the higher you move up the levels of understanding, the more holistic your view becomes. And also your ability to publish gets bigger because you're more empowered. (20)

The game metaphor offered various subject positions and opportunities for transformation. The subject positions ranged from fearing a 'hidden enemy' as a vulnerable novice and being at the mercy of luck and unknown threats, to the masterful player with knowledge, skill, and deeper understanding of their journey. Participant 20 made a conscious choice to gain agency and empowerment by rejecting 'the Road to Embitterment' and transformed to be a stronger player with a bigger picture view who can navigate the process with less trauma.

Changing costume – Dancing in a red dress 'flamenco style'

The peer review process was also strikingly described as clothing. In descriptions of early peer review experience, clothing represented a misfit and discomfort as described below.

And Mum sent us [him and his siblings] along to a fancy-dress ball as three blind mice. And we were sewn into umm crepe paper mouse suits. And we wet out pants. Brown crepe paper goes almost black when it's wet and we couldn't get out of it. And we went to the fancy dress party at the hall. And everybody was in flash, bought costumes, and we weren't. And Mum had tried really hard, you know, because we were a very poor family. And that to me is a little bit like turning up to my very first experience of a publication in a costume that's not my own trying to be ... trying to keep up with everybody else, and they've all turned up in bought stuff and they know the language and they know how to do things, and I was terrified that I would piss myself and not be able to get out of the costume. (6)

Participant 13 described the peer review process as, 'a dress that was a little ill-fitting and didn't quite suit me.' [...]. When asked more details about the dress, she expanded on the

details as ‘virginal white’ and ‘constricting’. Then described how it would transform into a better fitting dress now. ‘It wouldn’t be so exposing. [...] It would cover me up a little bit more (laughs). [...] It would be a lot more natural now. Would probably be a cotton or a ... I don’t know. Something a natural fibre it wouldn’t be so synthetic.’ When asked about the colour she said, ‘Red. [...] charging red, just being in charge and being the boss.’ It would have ‘a big swirly skirt [...] and I can kind of, you know, do my own. [...] Sticking out popping out [...] flamenco style, yeah.’

In these descriptions, the clothing of the dress and mouse costume demonstrated a level of vulnerability and constraint. The authors positioned themselves as ‘trying to keep up with everybody else’ and being in something ‘ill-fitting’. Clothing is a marker and reinforcer of social status. It has reinforced gender binaries but also serves as a medium of empowerment (Lynch & Medvedev, 2019). In this description, the dress transformed from a constricting original white garment to a new red one allowing more freedom and expression. The participant paired this description with more personal agency to ‘be in charge’.

Participant 6 dropped his mouse costume metaphor and sees himself as less of a boy in an ill-fitting costume made by somebody else and more as a man willingly taking on greater responsibilities. He positions himself as dominant in the adult/child binary, embracing the responsibility of ethical decision-making even though it may slow the speed of progress. He stated,

I feel like a man walking along the road who’s got a very heavy load of bricks that he has put on himself. And those bricks are called ethical responsibility. And they mean I can’t run as fast as I want to. Research has become so important that it makes it hard to do it in a dexterous manner. So ... he is still walking forward ... he is still walking forward but with a greater burden because there’s not the naivety there anymore. (6)

Another description of clothing as empowerment within the peer review process was Participant 20’s description of himself wearing a protective leather jacket.

Think of it [leather jacket] like the Matrix. You know that long, big jacket coat thing, you know, and if needs be, you can Kung Fu the opposition. [...] but also too, leather could be nice and soft and you can always open the leather jacket, let friends in and you know, so it’s, a shield when you need it. Uh, and it’s, it doesn’t put other people off, it’s just a necessary part of the toolkit and you use it as you see fit. (20)

This metaphor contained several entailments within it as the jacket was described as a ‘shield’ and part of ‘the toolkit’. There are also references to fighting, such as being able to ‘Kung Fu’ the opposition and be shielded. In contrast, descriptions of caring elements included being ‘nice and soft’ and being able to ‘let friends in’. Overall, this gives a sense of acquired power to both defend himself and protect others. This garment, like the red dress, increases the reviewee’s status and empowerment within the peer review process. Both participants 6 and 20 described gaining greater agency in the peer review process.

Cooking – ‘Working out how to feed your people’

As food is key to human survival and publishing is key to academic survival, it is perhaps not surprising that some academics drew on cooking metaphors to describe their

transformative experiences of engaging in power-balanced ways with peer review. Participant 19 likened her experience of peer review to ‘cooking’ and ‘working out how to feed your people’.

It’s like cooking. And it’s about getting feedback from the characters that you’re cooking for. So, it’s working out how to feed your people from a nutritional perspective in making it as creative and as fun and as interesting as you can. So, I think on a good day, people are offering ideas about how to make that meal better. On a bad day, they are meat eaters, and they want you to cook steak and you’ve made a vegetarian extravaganza. So, it’s never gonna work because they’ve missed the whole point of what it was about. (19)

There is a warning here of potential power imbalance in the binary between the cook and people eating the food, as the ‘cooks’ are at the mercy of the journal/editors/reviewers who may never appreciate the offering as they ‘miss the point’. This metaphor also has transformative potential towards empowerment as she realised that ‘getting feedback from the characters that you’re cooking for’ enables her to enjoy preparing manuscripts that she knows will be more likely to meet their needs.

Overcoming physical challenges – ‘Paddling downstream’

Physical challenges were used as metaphors by several academics. Transformative metaphors included paddling and marathon running to describe the peer review process. When describing early experiences of peer review, such metaphors suggest a sense of relative power-lessness and disempowerment in the binary of reviewees and editors/reviewers. These experiences changed over time to position the reviewee as gaining more control. Participant 13 described his early experiences of peer review as a difficult kayak journey he described as, ‘So in the past it was probably more like paddling upstream. Frantically trying to get to a target. To get out of the kayak and have a break.’

He conjures up vivid images of the relative power imbalance between paddler and stream as he is ‘frantically trying to get to a target’. He is soon overcome by the powerful current of the stream and wants ‘To get out of the kayak and have a break’. Over time the participant transforms the metaphor to a more power-balanced feeling of ‘going downstream’ as the paddler’s efforts become in tune with the flow.

Now it’s probably going downstream and you’re not negotiating rapids. And thinking about what’s going to happen in advance, those rapids aren’t particularly bad, and when you’re in them, you know the signs, and you know where the rocks are Mainly the current does the rest ... while I’m looking at the view. (13)

This becomes a more power-balanced experience as he described his greater control over the course of the river. He described it as now being more familiar with the process as he noted ‘when you’re in them [rapids], you know the signs, and you know where the rocks are.’ The review process has many hidden rituals and delays, and emotionally difficult times (Chan et al., 2021; Lu, 2013). He noted he was now ‘looking at the view’ which suggests he can stand back from the process and feel less embroiled in the emotional rapids. Participant 2 likened peer review to running a marathon. She said it was like,

Somebody who’s very unfit who decides they’re going to run a marathon. But try and do it without a training program or without a mentor. Without support, they’re gonna have days where their muscles are just screaming, and they’re gonna have injuries. And some people

are going to give up along the way if they don't get the right help and support. Some people are going to bumble through and sort it out by themselves. And everybody's got highs where they've achieved something. [...]. There is the woohoo! I've achieved something I've never thought I'm going to achieve, but you've had all of the injuries, the stumbles, the blisters along the way [...]. The blisters become normalised [...] it's part of the journey. (2)

This metaphor describes how the inexperienced author is 'unfit' in the beginning and they will experience pain of soreness and injury, which will end the journey for some. However, for those who are persistent and perhaps obtain mentoring, they can become more adapted to the journey and be rewarded. Persistence leads to the acceptance of pain and obtaining support which is 'part of the journey'. This imaginatively reframes the process as a normal one of strengthening the self through experiencing and coping with the injuries along the way. In addition, by obtaining mentoring and a training programme, the journey can be smoother than having to 'bumble through' on one's own. Physical challenge metaphors offer empowerment by normalising options for gaining support and the expectation of becoming stronger.

Discussion

Peer review of manuscripts for publication is a complex social interaction in higher education in which reviewers have power over those they review. It has been shaped by wider social practices as a gatekeeping force which decides what knowledge is accepted and disseminated. However, many who engage in it tolerate significant deficiencies in this process which are difficult to change (Chan et al., 2019; Lu, 2013). Metaphors create a mental model that determines how people make sense of an experience and guide their future actions with it (Stanley et al., 2021). This study explored the use of metaphor to describe the process of submitting manuscripts for peer review by 25 academics. We found transformed metaphors of playing the game, changing costumes, cooking, and physical challenges. Some of the metaphors used in this study matched those reported in previous research. For example, seeing the peer review journey as a fight was a conventional metaphor mentioned by Chan et al. (2021). Similar to the findings of Gravett et al. (2020), academics here also described peer review as a game in which many of the rules were tacit. The academics' reconceptualised metaphors demonstrated imaginative reframing in which they considered their experience from different perspectives, and a repositioning of subject position to a more powerful place. This is consistent with previous findings of successful reviewees describing their process with uplifting metaphors (Sword, 2017). The empowering transformation with metaphors may occur along the publishing journey or be developed on reflection as a method of describing a sense of a completed journey and comfortable identity. We noticed some participants were confident in the detailed articulation of their metaphors and positions (e.g., the protective leather jacket) while others appeared to be developing during the interview in response to interviewer prompting for elaboration (e.g., characteristics of the red dress), even though they had the interview questions in advance.

The current peer review system can be considered a 'social wrong' negatively impacting the identities and emotions of people. Some of the obstacles in this social system can be challenged and resisted through the creation of metaphors that contest oppressive discourses (Fairclough, 2016). Academics can use metaphors to make this opposition visible

to others and to engage in open discussion about peer review experiences. Peer review is a set routine of the interaction and the appropriate social and linguistic distance between the part being examined (manuscript) and the whole of the person. The settings in this routine control who can occupy certain roles and in what spaces these occur. Thereby, peer review comprises a ritualised process and discourse that positions reviewees and reviewers in unequal power relations to each other. Power is exercised in and *behind* discourse (Fairclough, 2015; 2016). Thus, the use of reconceptualised metaphors is powerful because initial conceptualisations can validate the position academics experience and then offer ways of reframing them.

Our participants were experienced academics who had also been in the position of reviewer, which gives a wider experience of power within the social system. For example, participant 21 noted the increased sense of power in the reviewer role. However, ECR and PG students likely encounter the peer review process first as an author (Chong & Mason, 2021). Thus, exploring and reconstructing the discourse of peer review through metaphors may encourage these reviewees to stay engaged with the publication process by offering a sense of empowerment at the disempowering stage of the process. New practices can be enacted in which experienced academics use metaphors to induct ECR and PG students into perceiving a more powerful position during peer review (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Mercer-Mapstone & Mercer, 2017). Written resources, workshops, or mentoring activities can promote awareness and use of metaphor conception and reconceptualisation.

Considering the vulnerability of ECR staff and PG students (Lee et al., 2022), group activities such as workshops can foster a supportive environment by including individuals who share similar vulnerabilities (Corkery et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2022). Co-creation of metaphors to reframe client issues in cognitive behavioural therapy has assisted people to create a shared language to help by 'providing a conceptual "bridge" from a problematic perspective to a new perspective that can ease experiences in a new light' (Mathieson et al., 2017, p. 578). Although ECR and PG students may feel disempowered, they can construct more empowering metaphors if given a supportive environment with guidance and role models, they can draw from their strengths and self-efficacy from previous experiences. The process may be ongoing as researchers still work within traditional challenges of creating quality manuscripts, which will inevitably encounter rejections from time to time. Thus, the incorporation of failure experiences as building blocks rather than stumbling blocks can contribute to individual perseverance and more positive experiences of the process.

Creation of a metaphor does not lead to an effortless change in one's reality. Deeper work is required to understand experiences through the new metaphor and then act in accordance with it. One reviewer of this study questioned whether Māori participants would draw metaphors from *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori worldview), which we did not see in our data. It is possible that in communication with us as non-Māori, they drew on metaphors more familiar to us and may have drawn from *Te Ao Māori* had the interviewers been Māori. This could be explored in future research. Taking the view of reality as influenced by human construction, metaphors impact what is real to the person (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Therefore, we recommend authors consider what reconceptualisations and actions their metaphors suggest and set goals to guide future experiences. This can be achieved by sharing the metaphors of others and providing space for

reflection and construction throughout the publication process. Sharing can help overcome the sense of isolation noted previously (Dynel, 2020).

Our study examined the metaphors as they were constructed or reported at the time of the interviews. We were not examining the impacts of memory on their construction as the ‘accuracy’ of recall was not the focus. The findings still apply to constructing metaphors at all stages of the journey. The following guides could be used iteratively in conjunction with a metaphor list (see [Table 1](#)) to start exploring this process.

Creating metaphor

1. Warm up – what are you aware of about experiencing the process of publishing? Write down some words or draw a sketch of what comes to mind. If nothing comes to mind, refer to [Table 1](#). Have a conversation with the person next to you and compare your notes or pictures. Share with the whole group.
2. Which metaphors of the peer review process resonated with you and why? (If none resonate with you and your context, can you think of your own?)
3. Have a conversation with others about the metaphors. What stands out for you and why?
4. Choose one metaphor and match its characteristics with your experiences or anticipated experiences of attempting to publish.
5. Compare your work with someone else (they may have a different level of experience from you). Are there any details you could add to your metaphor from the comparison?
6. What are the power differences between you and other characters (people or objects) in your metaphor?
7. How could you reconceptualise your metaphor to balance the power dynamics more? What changes are within your control to make?

Experiencing metaphor

1. Apply this reconceptualised metaphor to your next manuscript submission experience. Reflect on how well this metaphor served you by matching your lived experiences to your metaphor – what could lead to actionable steps in behaviour or perspective change to increase positivity in your future experience?
2. Share findings with your academic community. Use metaphors to encourage discussion about the manuscript peer review process and encourage others to consider ways of reflecting on the experience of power as either authors or reviewers. When sharing findings, consider who might be receptive to open discussions and who might be resistant to giving up traditional positions of power.

Future visions – Challenging the binary

Previous research has shown many negative metaphors describing the peer review process. As we found, some settle for being skillful players in the game, developing

thicker skins, or donning protective costumes. The use of metaphor can enable authors to start reframing their experiences and positions within the peer review hierarchy. By sharing alternative perspectives with others, academics can create supportive, and inclusive cultures of authorship and review in which there is greater care and respect. Hopefully, the use of metaphors can extend beyond the individual-as-author level and include becoming a reviewer and for existing reviewers to be mindful of the wider social practice of peer review.

Metaphors reveal some aspects and conceal others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). A concealed aspect of power, especially in the game and physical challenge metaphors, is the struggle to navigate and endure the process. Even though it leads to achievement, the unpleasant aspect of struggle and pain is normalised, and the end justifying the means or becoming a badge of honour. However, access to knowledge should not be an ‘intellectual assault course’ which excludes the non-elite (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 7). Sword (2017, p. 188) also cautioned,

the ‘school of hard knocks’ metaphor suggests that struggle and setbacks can lead to new learning, its accompanying image of ‘thicker skin’ merely promises a dulling of pain. Becoming thick-skinned is at best a survival strategy, and its shadow side offers a warning: as our skin thickens, will our hearts harden as well?

Metaphors do not always fully offer positions of equal power in the construction of identity because they may not address the binary distinctions between reviewee and reviewer in the current system. For example, in the cooking metaphor by Participant 19, although she learned to adjust her cooking to feed her people, it was still the reviewers who determined the menu. Similarly, the marathon training metaphor by Participant 2 offered a sense of getting stronger but did not question whether the pain and blisters should be a part of the process. Likewise, previous research noted that although the use of humour offers a sense of superiority to the oppressed (Dynel, 2020), this also does not challenge the binary nature of the system, merely repositions the players in the game. Therefore, further work on the review system is needed to dismantle the disrespectful power dynamics of the reviewer/reviewee binary.

Dismantling binaries can be challenging for those the system empowers as ‘it requires those with power to climb out of their comfort-zones, to unpick the binaries by which they have traditionally defined themselves or been defined by their institutions’ (Mercer-Mapstone & Mercer, 2017, p. 140). It is interesting to note the metaphors used in the previous quote as those in power must also ‘climb out’ of a constraint in their interactions with others and ‘unpick’ established and well-worn ‘clothing’ of social relations. One way to approach this is for academics who occupy both roles of reviewee and reviewer to consider metaphors for each. Future research could explore how the reconceptualisation of the peer review process as reviewee (balancing power with the reviewer) affects their conceptualisations of self as a reviewer, or journal editor. Study of the metaphors used by reviewers may reveal hidden, oppressive conceptions and actions. However, those who benefit from hierarchal power may be more resistant to relinquishing it (McDonald & Coleman, 1999), so this process may be more challenging. Another way to approach this could be by examining the use of metaphor to describe the experience of open peer review in which the identities of the reviewers and reviewees are made known, which could reveal how power is perceived

and enacted in this space. This may offer reviewers the opportunity to align reviewing actions with values of wellbeing.

Conclusion

Domination and oppression within educational practices should be deconstructed and critiqued (Freire, 1972). The academic manuscript peer review system enacts oppressive power relations which are damaging to the wellbeing of academics seeking to publish their work. This gatekeeping system will require considerable time to change and thus requires developing awareness and resilience in the early stages (Chan et al., 2021). Through learning from each other, authors can create more empowering positions and actions for ourselves and our immediate communities. This is particularly important for ECR and PG students who may be more vulnerable to abandoning research in response to harsh criticism. We show how deconstructing and crafting other's metaphors can help new and established academics to adopt or construct their own understanding of the peer review process and create metaphors to empower themselves from the outset rather than be affected by years of negative experiences. We invite academics, both reviewees and reviewers, to reflect on the relationship of domination currently operating in the peer review process and seek to push against the oppressive and hidden boundaries of peer review so that it feels less like gatekeeping and more genuine peer mentoring and support. We invite publishing reviewees to shake off the white, constricting, exposing, and ill-fitting garment and publish while dancing in a red dress.

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