Symbolic Modelling as an innovative phenomenological method in NLP research: the work-life balance project

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James Lawley is co-author of ‘Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling’ and over 40 articles. He has been developing Symbolic Modelling and David Grove’s Clean Language as a research methodology since 2003 having collaborated with Liverpool John Moores University, Macquarie University, University College London, and University of Surrey.

Wendy Sullivan (speaker) is a specialist Clean Language trainer, NLP trainer, coach and psychotherapist. Owner of Clean Change Company and co-author of ‘Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds’ (Crown House), she is interested in researching Clean Language/Symbolic Modelling to maximise the efficacy of their use in real life contexts.

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Abstract

We present an innovative use of modelling employed as a research methodology in a pilot study seeking insight into the mechanics of a commonly-used but undifferentiated concept: “work-life balance” (WLB). We found Symbolic Modelling [1] - a recent development in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming - to be particularly suited to this kind of investigation as it allows the emergence of ‘what is’ and has a natural tendency to map the provenance of each concept and nuance. Symbolic Modelling is a metaphor-based practice, in the phenomenological tradition [2], that uses a questioning process called ‘Clean Language’ [3] which seeks to elicit subjective...
experience with minimal semantic and metaphorical contamination from the questioner’s language.

We present potential methodological enhancements [4] which address the contemporary critique of phenomenological research methods [5] and significantly extend the capability of qualitative research through Symbolic Modelling’s ability to reveal the structure of subjective experience through isomorphism with the structure of reported metaphor.

This project applied Symbolic Modelling in order to elicit the naturally occurring metaphors for WLB from six managers. The analysis of the unique metaphor landscape for each manager yielded one key finding: although the “work-life balance” metaphor is commonly used, none of the interviewees’ main metaphors overtly involved “a balance”.

Specifically, Symbolic Modelling as a research methodology can: provide a coherent research strategy that guides the researcher from formulating the research question to analysing transcripts and reviewing features and patterns of the data; distinguish between metaphors introduced by a researcher into their questions or interpretation, and those that originate in, and faithfully represent, interviewees’ subjective worlds; and offer the interviewer the means to elicit and model the interviewee’s metaphor landscape. The approach can also provide explicit and systematic principles and techniques that can be shared by researchers, thereby increasing the transparency of the process of interpretation.

This methodology could be used, for example, to facilitate quality evaluations by users of NLP, heretofore an untapped source in NLP research [6], e.g. modelling an NLP client’s experience before an intervention and again following, to elicit the nature of any changes. One drawback with this approach is that awareness arising directly from the metaphor elicitation can itself be a powerful agent for change, as shown by the spontaneous changes made by a number of the WLB interviewees.

We propose that this research method is well-suited for research into NLP, given that a positivist reductionist stance has been much critiqued in social sciences [7] and yet the value of carrying out empirical research in NLP is becoming more widely acknowledged [8]. In addition, Symbolic Modelling, with its alignment to contemporary thinking about language and cognition in relation to metaphor [9], [10], seems well-positioned to facilitate ‘NLP to become discussed routinely within research communities’ (Tosey & Mathison 2009:p143). We hope that as relationships develop between NLP and other disciplines, cross-fertilisation will follow and the community of inquiry into NLP will continue to grow and flourish.

Bibliography

