



More than a Balancing Act?
`Clean Language' as an innovative method for
exploring work-life balance

Project Report

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University of Surrey and Clean Change Company

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1 Executive summary

We believe this small-scale study by the Clean Change Company and the University of Surrey is the first funded research project to explore Clean Language¹, an innovative communications and facilitation practice increasingly used in coaching, business consulting, organisation development, market research, and across the helping professions. Prior to this study, the practice of Clean Language had been significantly under-researched; reports of its uses and effectiveness were largely informal and led by practitioners' perceptions.

The purpose of the study was to test the application of Clean Language as a research method. Specifically, we wanted to use Clean Language in interviews with managers in order to generate insights into their experiences of 'work-life balance' (WLB).

Our findings will be of interest to industry researchers, academic researchers, Clean Language practitioners and people interested in understanding work-life balance.

We hope this study will pave the way for further research into Clean Language, and for further application of Clean Language as a research method.

¹ For further information about Clean Language see Section 2, 'Background'.

1.1 Key findings – insights into Work-Life Balance

- All participants had unique, dynamic and highly personal metaphors for their experience.
- While participants conveyed their sense of relationship between different domains of life in varying ways, these domains were not necessarily categorised as 'work' and 'life'.
- Nor were participants necessarily seeking to achieve 'balance'. The explicit metaphor of 'balance' appeared only rarely, even though many of the participants' metaphors implied a notion of *balancing*.

1.2 Key findings – Clean Language as a research method

- Clean Language can be used at any of four levels:
 - A questioning technique to avoid introducing the researcher's own metaphors into the interviewee's account.
 - A method for eliciting interviewee-generated metaphors.
 - A process for eliciting 'models' derived from each individual's metaphors.
 - An overarching research strategy.
- Participants commented favourably on the experience of being interviewed through a Clean Language approach.
- There was evidence that some participants made spontaneous changes to improve their WLB as a result of exploring their metaphors through the interviews.

2 Background: about Clean Language²

Originated in the 1980s by counselling psychologist David Grove from his work with trauma victims, Clean Language is a method of questioning that facilitates a person's exploration of their inner world – their own, naturally occurring 'metaphor landscape'.

Grove's discovery, substantiated by twenty-five years of experiential research through clinical practice, was that facilitating a client to remain immersed in these landscapes enabled effective resolution of issues to take place.

Grove's technique came to be known as 'Clean Language' because of its absolute fidelity to the client's inner working model of the world. A central and significant feature of the practice is that the practitioner's interventions remain as free as possible from the practitioner's own metaphors and assumptions; hence the notion that the interviewer's language needs to be 'clean'. For this reason, Clean Language questions are characterised by their unique form, which is designed both to minimise the interviewer's content and to prioritise the client's own experience.

² This report does not aim to describe the Clean Language questions, or to explain how these are used in practice to elicit metaphor landscapes. A comprehensive introduction to these topics can be found in Lawley and Tompkins (2000) and Sullivan and Rees (2008).

In the 1990s Grove's distinctive methods were studied over some years by psychotherapists Penny Tompkins and James Lawley (Lawley & Tompkins 2000). Tompkins and Lawley not only began to theorise the practice, drawing on theories of metaphor and embodied cognition as developed by, for example, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), but also made it more widely accessible.

Explaining their approach, Lawley and Tompkins describe Clean as 'a method of facilitating individuals to become more familiar with the organisation of their metaphors so that they can discover new ways of perceiving themselves and their world' (2000:xiv). The methodology for eliciting metaphor landscapes devised by David Grove not only uses Clean Language but also facilitates the interviewee (or client) to 'self-model', as Lawley and Tompkins have called it. At the same time, the interviewer constructs their own model of what the client is exploring, in order to decide where to direct the interviewee's attention.

As its name suggests, 'modelling'³ involves constructing a mental model or representation of someone's experience. Modelling is essential to the practise of Clean Language. It requires the interviewer to maintain an unusual perspective, a key aspect of which is that the interviewer temporarily suspends their own model, landscape and perspectives, and accepts that the conversation will be conducted *solely* in terms of the interviewee's emerging (metaphor) landscape. Lawley and Tompkins call this whole process

³ Derived from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), see Dilts (1998).

of using Clean Language to question an interviewee about their metaphors, and then using the information gained to construct a model, 'Symbolic Modelling'.

Clean Language training courses now support a growing practice and an ever-expanding range of applications across business⁴, education and medicine, in areas that include IT, project management, and sales (Sullivan & Rees 2008). It is being used increasingly for interviewing, for example by a police force interviewing vulnerable witnesses in order to avoid leading the witness⁵. Clean Language has also begun to receive media attention⁶.

Academic interest to date is principally in relation to teaching and learning. For example, Clean Language has been used at the Open University in course materials developed by Dr John Martin⁷; by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Liverpool John Moores University⁸; and in the University of Surrey's MBA⁹.

⁴ <http://www.cleancchange.co.uk/cleanlanguage/2010/10/05/clean-change-case-studies/>, accessed 10th October 2010.

⁵ <http://www.trainingattentioninthecommunity.co.uk/police%20interviewing.pdf> accessed 10th October 2010.

⁶ 'The Healing Power of Positive Language', BBC news online 27 October 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8326171.stm>, accessed 15th September 2010.

⁷ Video and transcripts: 'Metaphor and Imagery' available via the 'OU on iTunes U' at: <http://open.edu/itunes/>, accessed 27th September 2010.

⁸ 'Modelling the curriculum through metaphors: One programme's approach' Sarah Nixon and Caitlin Walker.' http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/ECL/ECL_docs/CETL_Journal_No2.pdf, accessed 16th September 2010

⁹ Module in Strategic Change Management, co-ordinator Dr Paul Tosey.

3 Exploring Work-Life Balance: research challenges

A key aim of this project was to conduct a systematic investigation of Clean Language *in action*, as a research method that offers both refined techniques for exploring individuals' inner worlds through metaphor, and a working application of theories of metaphor.

The contribution that we believe Clean Language could make is to distinguish clearly between metaphors introduced by a researcher as an interpretive device, and those that originate in, belong to, and faithfully represent, interviewees' subjective worlds. Appendix A ('Whose "edge"? An example of "non-Clean" use of metaphor in academic research') elucidates the consequences of using a 'non-Clean' approach, taken from published research.

Work-Life Balance was chosen as a focus for further research because it is a subject of common concern within organisations and across the helping professions. It was also of interest in relation to Clean Language because recent academic research has pinpointed and questioned the metaphor of 'balance' which is embedded in the wider WLB concept (Cohen, Duberley, & Musson 2009; Roberts 2008).

Such an overtly metaphorical research topic is far from 'clean', and carries with it a number of challenges and risks. We chose to investigate WLB in part because it would entail dealing with these

interesting challenges, rather than seeking to eliminate such complexity.

The first challenge is the possibility that interviewees could be influenced by the very nature of the question, and/or that the research could be biased in the direction of the two categories of 'work' and 'life', and the metaphor of 'balance'. Furthermore, the typical concept of WLB presupposes that:

- people divide their experience into these two categories – 'work' and 'life'
- these two categories are related by an experience analogous to 'balance'
- common notions of balance would require 'work' and 'life' to operate in some way to counterbalance, stabilize, compensate for, or offset each other.

Our project therefore aimed to question these presuppositions.

A second challenge relates to the complexity of the research question. WLB is a more difficult subject matter to explore than it might at first appear, requiring interviewees to have at least some perception of 'work' and its counterpart ('life'), together with some means of evaluating or assessing the relationship between the two. The task becomes even more complex if the respondent experiences only limited ownership of the 'WLB' metaphor.

These challenges became immediately apparent during the face-to-face interviews when, in response to the opening question, ‘When your work-life balance is at its best, that’s like what?’¹⁰ some of the interviewees commented directly, or by implication, that they were construing the world differently:

It's [an] interesting concept isn't it and I think for me it's a statement that came out – I first became aware of [it] a few years ago, I never used to see my life as a kind of a balance between work or life personally... I just didn't see it as an either-or. (Interviewee E)

Interviewee A’s response was to translate the opening research question into their own words:

So in work-life balance I - presume you're - when I'm happiest at work and happiest at home, is that what you're saying?

Before the study began, we surmised that care and skill would be needed to elicit interviewees’ self-perceptions of all three concepts, and to maintain a focus on the crucial concept of ‘balance’ (the metaphor that notionally describes the relationship between work and life). In the event, these were tasks that required complex

¹⁰ The question ‘When x is at its best, that’s like what?’ (and variations on this question) is commonly used by Clean Language modellers to elicit the metaphor for a person’s ideal state or situation. It was developed by Clean facilitator Caitlin Walker.

mental processing on the part of interviewees, and real skill on the part of the interviewer.

Acknowledging that all research questions involve some presupposition, we recommend that future exploration of WLB with managers using a Clean approach should be undertaken using a less well defined metaphor (for example, exploring the notion of the 'relationship' between work and life) to determine whether it makes a material difference to interviewees' descriptions.

4 Research methodology

For the purposes of this small-scale study, the interview sample was deliberately limited to six participants. In order to provide a reasonably uniform set of participants, and given that the project was located within and funded by a management department, we decided to seek participants who were mid-career managers (aged 40-50, of both genders) in fulltime employment. None of the managers was trained in Clean Language, nor were they primed about Clean at any stage.¹¹

Participants were drawn from contacts of Clean Change Company and were recruited by the project manager. They came from three different organisations. The project was explained in writing. In keeping with research sector standards and best practice, the project obtained voluntary, informed, written consent of all research participants. Their identities and those of their employers have been anonymised in this report. Interviews were set up by phone or email contact. All the research participants were invited to ask questions in advance of the interview, although none took up this option.

An experienced Clean Language interviewer was appointed to carry out six initial face-to-face Clean Language interviews of up to one

¹¹ For example, we could have provided some examples of metaphors for WLB, and asked the interviewees in advance of the interview to consider their metaphors for WLB. We chose not to do this, so that the interviews would provide data on how those with no special preparation or experience respond to Clean Language interviewing.

hour, and six follow-up interviews of approximately thirty minutes each.

The face-to-face interviews were carried out in participant workplaces in May and June 2010. Approximately two weeks after that first set of interviews, follow-up interviews were carried out by phone or Skype.

In the initial interviews, participants were invited to explore their experiences and metaphors of WLB at its best and not at its best; interviews were video and audio-recorded in order to capture both the verbal and non-verbal detail of the Clean Language research method in action. All interviews were transcribed. Additionally, each respondent was asked to produce a drawing of her or his metaphors after the first interview; this is a standard protocol in Clean Language practice.

The follow-up interviews had two aims: 1) to capture interviewees' reflections on the initial interview, together with their perceptions of the consequences and benefits or disbenefits of the process; and 2) to gather more details about interviewees' main metaphors. The follow-up interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The transcriptions were 'cleanly' marked-up by the interviewer such that the source of each word (ie whether it was from a participant or the interviewer) could be easily identified.

The interviewer then carried out an initial analysis of data gathered from each face-to-face interview, highlighting key metaphors and themes and, in particular, the distinctions between WLB at its best and not best. Verbatim quotations taken from each interview were included to support this analysis.

In a final step, an expert Clean Language analyst was commissioned to check and validate both the accuracy of the transcript analyses ensuring that they were faithful to interviewees' descriptions, and the overall integrity of the Clean Language interview process. For this study to meet its objectives, it was important to ensure that interviews were authentic examples of Clean questioning and modelling.

5 Participants' metaphor landscapes

This section presents summaries of each of the six participant's metaphor landscapes, using their own words.

Although there was no explicit intention to identify how the interviewees assessed their WLB at the time of the interview, the majority of interviewees did comment on their current situation with most reporting that they were currently far from at their best ('a million miles away', said one in their follow-up interview).

5.1 *'It's like a circle'*

Interviewee A's theme is one of a 'happy' cycle of 9 to 5 division between work and home. A describes the ideal daily cycle as 'You would know what you're doing from day to day, you'd come to work, you'd do your job well, you'd go home and you have no stress, you have no strain [...] then you would carry out everything you planned to do that evening [...] for some quality time with the family.'

When WLB is at its best it is 'like a circle' made of two parts ('work life' and 'home life'). Ideally the two come together, touch, and there is a 'fragile join' between them. 'If you like the circle's completed and [...] it's just going round and around and around [...]

it comes together and – and that creates your WLB and that is always joined [...] then there's no problems.'

At work it is more mental than emotional. It is more 'yes, I've done a good job there'. There's a 'checklist (Gantt chart) in your brain' and the items in it get 'done, done, ticked off'.

When the circle becomes 'disjointed' there are 'problems'. When WLB is not at its best the join breaks and 'you are immersed in one or the other'. Work affects home life or home life affects work. If work life has an effect it can 'break the join and if home life has an effect it breaks the join'. The join is 'a very fragile join, yes because [...] it's almost held together by that moment [...] and it's not held by anything else [...] there's no guarantee [...] it's not like you can superglue them together'. When the join breaks there is distance in the circle. 'The ultimate aim is that [the circle] is connected.'

5.2 'Going up a mountain dodging boulders'

Interviewee B's theme is one of meeting expectations. The distinction between 'work' and 'life outside work' is not clearly separated; rather, both appear in a landscape of 'dodging boulders' that can come from many sources.



Figure 1: Interviewee B (Work life balance at its best) - Riding the crest of a wave

WLB at its best is like 'doing a particularly good job at juggling', like 'riding on the crest of a wave [...] you're on top of everything [...] you're on a high, I suppose [...] a natural high.' 'Riding' is like 'surfing', being 'on the surfboard' [with] 'perfect balance and [...] on your feet.'

This is short lived and for the most part WLB is like 'going up a mountain' while 'having to dodge boulders', where previously the boulders were balls to juggle. When WLB is not at its best, stress levels go up and there are more and heavier boulders coming down the mountain and more chance of getting crushed. WLB is at its best when it is not only like 'riding the crest of the wave', but also like 'making good progress up the mountain', keeping going, 'managing to dodge the boulders' – 'but you're not at the top'. Some 'being

stressed' and 'feeling time pressure' is required for good WLB, making it 'all such a fine balance to find'.

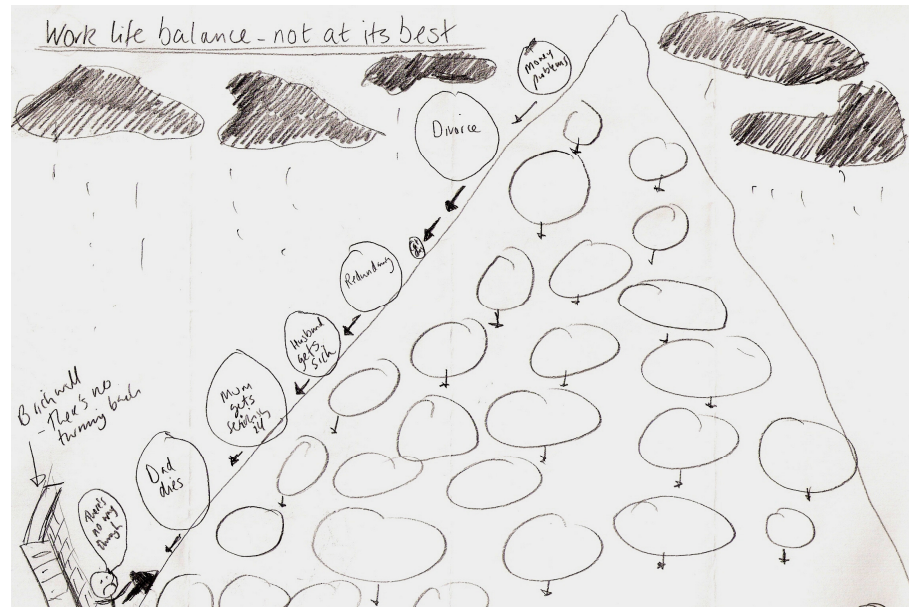


Figure 2: Interviewee B (Work life balance not at its best) - Going up a hill dodging boulders

5.3 'Mental separation'

Interviewee C's WLB theme is one of mental separation:

'Time to do things properly. That separation is easy physically but it's difficult mentally'. When 'Time to do things properly' exists at work and at home then there is WLB. When it does not exist then there is 'thinking about things at home' when at work and 'thinking of things at work' when at home. 'Time to do things properly' at work means 'Clearing all of the things off the tick list.'

When WLB is at its best there is 'a sense of feeling in control both at home and at work'. C describes this as setting out what you want to do that day by creating a tick list: 'Visually I kind of make a list or a picture [...] a bit of paper with [the tasks] written down [...] a bullet-pointed list and I have this vision of kind of being able to tick them off.' Once all items are ticked off there is 'kind of icing on the cake [...] stepping back and looking at the big picture'. 'You feel confident [of] your own ability'. At home there is no tick list and there is 'being supportive, being there and seeing [the] kids grow up and nice things happen.'

When WLB is not at its best the list is not cleared. At home there is worrying about what still needs to be done with the list 'nagging at the back of your mind'.

5.4 'A split with a Friday evening switch'

Interviewee D's opening response laid out the main theme:

'Weekends are for family, weeks are for work [...] that's the sort of split I do'. This 'split' played out through the remainder of the interview. When WLB is at its best the two do not interfere, there is no blur. 'Week' is characterised by a 'logical me' who is 'structured' and 'intense'; 'The pace at which I do everything in the week is boom-boom-boom-boom-boom'. This pace is set by D and it is one that 'comes from my ambition'. Batteries supply energy that is required for the week and these are 'recharged' at 'weekend'. Weekends are characterised by 'me' that is 'loosey-goosey [...] much

more just sort of going with the flow'. This is also a more social 'me'. The pace at the weekend 'just drops right down', with its own energy. The switch between 'week' and 'weekend' happens on a Friday; 'a sort of Friday evening switch', which is also the 'switch that comes back on [...] with the alarm clock on Monday morning'.

The weekend and week are like 'the Yin and Yang' – 'one of them allows me to do the other one'. Yin and Yang 'support each other and keep different parts of me happy.' The weekend 'satisfies a whole basket of needs', while the week 'the whole basket of other needs'.

When WLB is not at its best 'the distinction between the week and weekend' becomes 'blurred'. Weekends become more structured and more deadline driven and 'it just hits you'.

5.5 'A deal'

Interviewee E's theme is one of a 'deal' between employer and employee around a 9 to 5 division between work and home and commute; and between week and weekend. 'For me the concept of work-life balance is that it's a deal [...] I've got to have a routine around things as long as there's a deal that actually if I do do the extra, there is pay-back from time to time when I want it.'

WLB at its best is when you have a deal – people are fairly treated and there is flexibility. The deal involves flexibility beyond what's

contractual and the details of the deal can change from organisation to organisation.

When WLB is not at its best there is a master-servant relationship between employer and employee. Then there is no deal: people feel exploited, like cannon fodder.

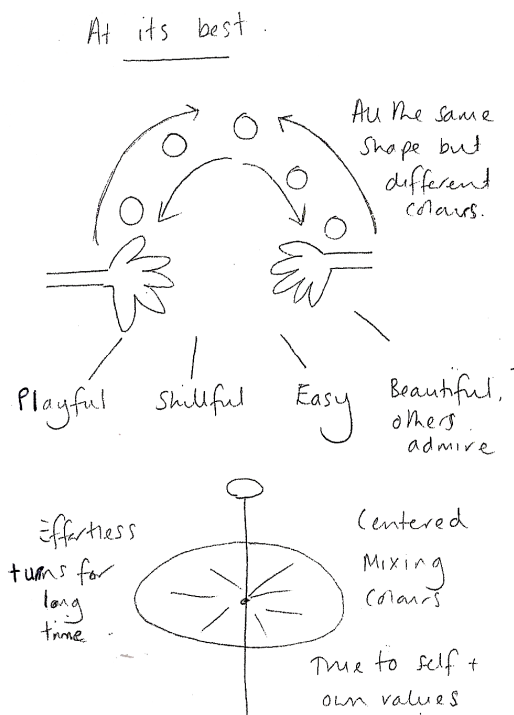
For E, 'the whole commute is part of that deal'. Evenings are for 'life tasks' – tasks around the house, so 'that way you free your weekend up'. The weekend is where 'I can do things I actually want to enjoy', such as being outside. E's shoulders lift and blood pressure drops, 'you just think well isn't life great'.

During the working day intensity is high and the weekend is taking itself on a process of going down. 'You feel healthier – it's a kind of virtuous circle.' If WLB is at its best 'you don't think about it until you wake up Monday morning.' 'I think the best feeling in the world is if you're having a good day, really busy, before you know it it's five o'clock.'

5.6 'Juggling'

Interviewee F's theme is one of matching external demands and expectations to 'who I am as a person'. When this is in balance then WLB is good.

When WLB is at its best it is like juggling 'with ease', with a sense of balance, feeling energised. 'You're holding quite a few things at the same time' but they are within reach and 'you are catching them'. 'You're tossing balls up into the air and then they're almost falling back into your hands without you having to strain and struggle.' It has a playful feel about it.



Figurer 3: Interviewee F (Work life balance at its best) - Juggling with ease, feeling centred like a spinning top

Things are thrown at F and 'I have to match them to what's important to me.' 'You're acting out of that place where you feel centred and making conscious choices with ease.' Centred is like a spinning top, spinning on its centre, spinning with ease.' Everybody admires [it] because it's beautiful.' The spinning top is a toy that 'can

take you into a whole world of discovery and creativity and imagination’.

When WLB is not at its best ‘there are [...] several tops [...] they’re all spinning but they [...] need attention at different times and then it’s no longer playful because you’re having to run from one to the other to keep them spinning’.

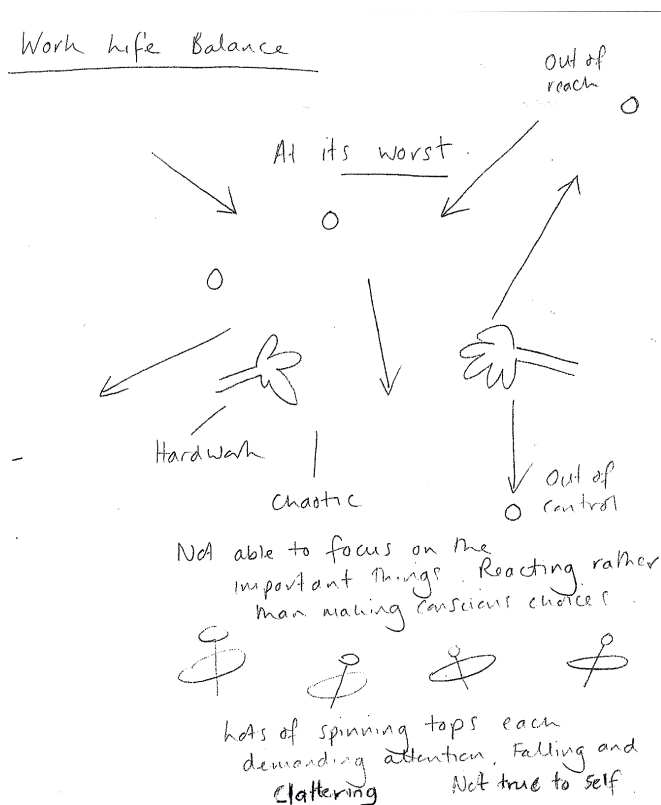


Figure 4: Interviewee F (Work-life balance not at its best) - Several tops spinning, not playful, having to run from one to the other

In this metaphoric system, F’s choices determine whether WLB is working well or not (one top or several tops). ‘If I am being true to who I am, there isn’t a difference then between how I’m acting at home or at work.’

6 Findings about metaphors of Work-Life Balance

6.1 From *'balance'* to *'balancing'*

A key finding from these six interviews is that, despite the apparent popularity of the 'work-life balance' metaphor in common parlance, not one of our interviewees' main metaphors overtly involved 'a balance'.

A number of their metaphors did imply some form of *balancing*, for example while 'juggling' (Interviewees B and F), 'surfing' (Interviewee B), or in 'equality' (Interviewee E). Interestingly, the more the interview progressed, the less 'balance' was actively involved in participants' descriptions unless re-introduced by the interviewer.

Given the central significance of 'balancing' (however this is represented) in this study, we are moved to recommend that future research into WLB pays explicit attention to the concept of 'balancing'.

6.2 *Patterns across interviews*

All the interviewees identified a number of metaphors and spent a considerable portion of the interview describing and examining these metaphors.

Other frequently occurring metaphors, aside from those relating to ‘balancing’, are shown in Table 1.

| Metaphor | Used by interviewee: |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| Stress | All |
| Control | All but A |
| Split | A, C, D, F |
| Pressure | All but D |
| Emotional | All but E (E used psychological) |
| Physical | All but E |
| Mental | All |
| Rational | A, E, F |

Table 1: Frequently occurring metaphors

A metaphor of ‘separation/compartmentalisation’ was used by five of the six managers and was a recurring theme, with four of the six interviewees using the metaphor of a ‘split’. For some, a separation was part of WLB at its best (‘the idea of [...] the Friday night switch [...] the question on “how do you move from one to the other?”’, Interviewee D), while for others, it was the absence of a split that indicated WLB at its best. Thus for Interviewee A, WLB is ‘like a circle’ made of two parts, ‘work life’ and ‘home life’, and there is a ‘fragile join’ between them; ‘If you like the circle’s completed and [...] it’s just going round and around and around [...] it comes together and – and that creates your WLB and that is always joined.’ (Interviewee A)

The metaphor of a 'circle' – vicious, virtuous or negative – was mentioned in three of the face-to-face interviews (Interviewees A, C and E) and by another manager in the follow-up (Interviewee F). While it was a central metaphor for only one manager, it was commonly used to express both the interconnectedness of several factors, and that the degree of WLB could vary by becoming better or worse. This feature of experience may indicate that, consciously or otherwise, these managers were thinking somewhat systemically about their situation. Because of this, we consider it important that future research addresses the question of how these managers scaled¹² their sense of WLB; in other words, by what means were they able to decide that it was getting better or worse (both day-by-day and over longer time periods), and how did they know when it had crossed a threshold from being at its best to being no longer at its best – or vice versa.

¹² 'Scaling' refers to the way that people use scales to rank things in order to express relativeness. While a culture has many agreed scales – eg minutes and hours for the passing of time – individuals have their own unique metaphorical scales for other aspects of their lives. For example, two of many possible metaphors for scaling 'control of a situation' could be to assess the *amount* or the *level* of control the individual believes they have in a situation. Commonly a scale will have a threshold at either extreme, beyond which something different happens. See <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/26/1/Big-Fish-in-a-Small-Pond-The-Importance-of-Scale/Page1.html>.

6.3 *Explicit and implicit metaphors*

Lakoff and Johnson say that 'Metaphorical thought is unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious' (2003:272), and this appeared to be true in this study. The transcripts revealed that interviewees were always using more metaphor than they probably realised. For example, it seems unlikely that any of the interviewees who used the word 'control' were aware of using it in a metaphorical sense. The following example shows how initially Interviewee D was unaware of his comments about his Friday evening switch being metaphoric (ie making this metaphor implicit), and how that changed subsequently with the interviewer's questions.

Q: [...] and you operate in a different way, and what - what happens between work and weekend when you - when you operate in a different, what happens - ?

A: I think [...] there is sort of a - there's sort of a Friday evening switch almost, yes, so - so Friday evening becomes a just- a relaxation and almost [...] just a big relaxation that suddenly the week is - generally speaking the week is finished.

In the follow up interview, D says:

Once I [...] sort of tune[d] into the thinking about metaphors [...] it did feel it got easier for me [...] as I sort of more tuned into

thinking about [...] the two switches [...] everything started to sort of fall into place a bit more.

Table 2 shows an example for each interviewee of a metaphor that was made explicit during the interview, and of a metaphor that was left implicit. Those in the right-hand column are noticeably more conceptual than those in the left hand column.

| Interviewee | Explicit metaphor | Implicit metaphor |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| A | 'perfect circle' | 'dictates' |
| B | 'climbing a mountain' | 'pressure' |
| C | n/a | 'control' |
| D | 'switch' | 'split' |
| E | 'master/slave' | 'switch off' |
| F | 'juggling' | 'energised' |

Table 2: Explicit and implicit metaphors

6.4 Modelling a metaphor landscape

A principal claim for the Clean Language method is that an interviewee can be encouraged to describe their experience in a way that gives some insight into how his or her metaphor landscape works as a whole, as a coherent system.

We consider that the project has substantiated this claim; all of the interviews contain a wealth of information with enough quality to construct an understanding of an individual's metaphoric system.

The notion of a system refers to the fact that eliciting a model successfully requires information about both the *elements* of someone's experience and, crucially, the *relationship* between those components, in particular the sequential, causal and contingent relationships. In the context of this project, our hypothesis was that interviewees could be facilitated to self-model their personal metaphors of WLB, in the process describing their experience in a way that demonstrated how the elements and events fit together. If successful, such an approach could greatly extend existing understanding of how individuals construe and experience WLB.

An example of how a prototype model of a metaphoric system can be derived from the interview data (for Interviewee B) is shown below (Figure 5). With reference to this prototype, we note that as well as 'juggling lots of tennis balls in harmony', B gave another metaphor that summed up good WLB; that is, like 'riding the crest of a wave'. The latter metaphor is not shown in the model because it seems parallel to (isomorphic with) B's metaphor of 'juggling'; 'riding the crest of a wave' can therefore be regarded as an alternative to the 'juggling' metaphor, and not as an additional element of the model.

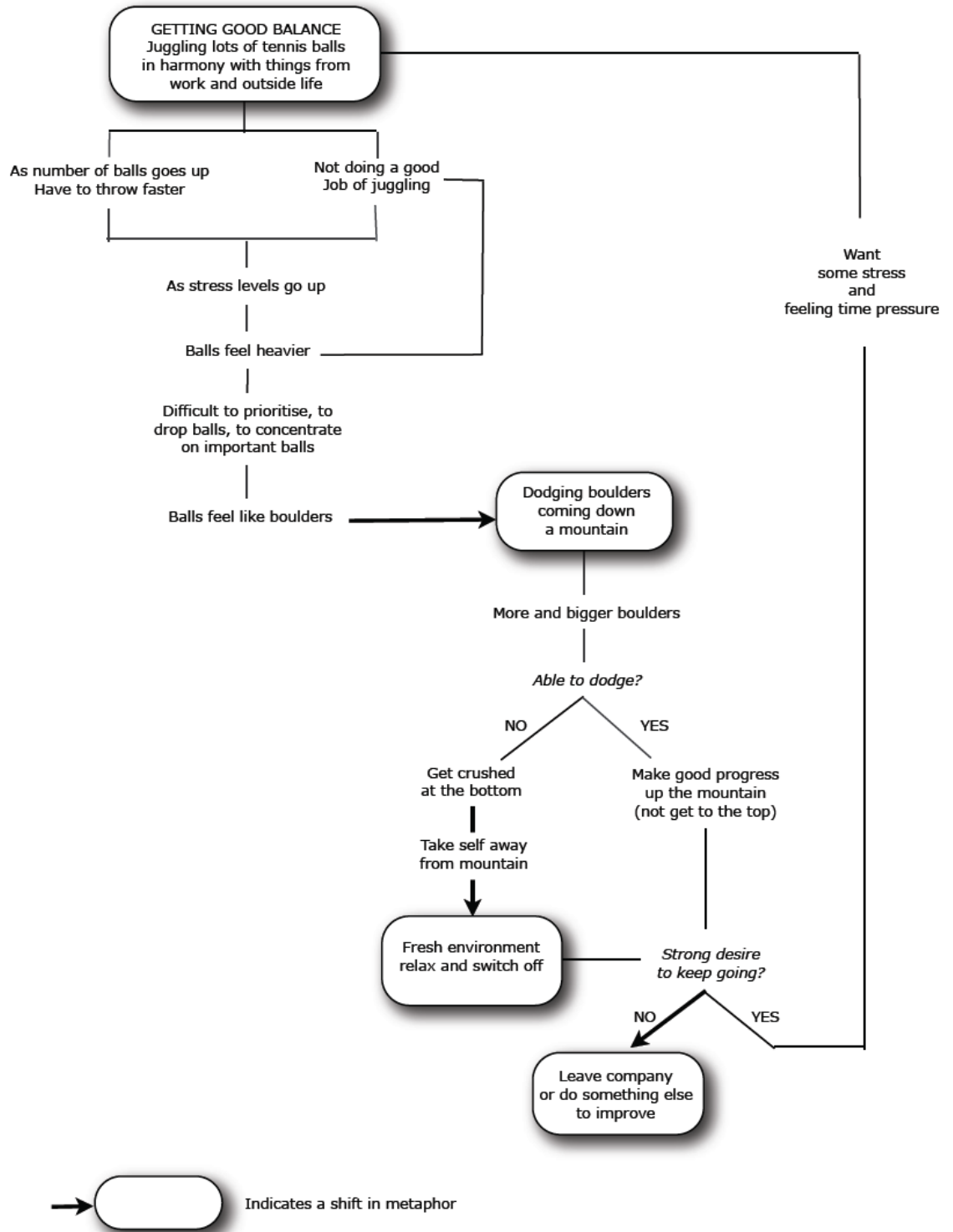


Figure 5: Model of how Interviewee B's metaphor of 'work-life balance' works over time

7 Findings about Clean Language as a research method

7.1 Keeping it Clean

In the judgement of the expert analyst, the face-to-face interviews constituted an authentic application of Clean Language, both at a 'micro' level (questioning technique/staying Clean) and as a modelling process. The interviewer remained faithful to a Clean Language methodology, and indeed has set a benchmark that any future research using Clean Language should seek to emulate.

The transcripts show some variation in the way that both the face-to-face and follow-up interviews were opened up for discussion, resulting in the unintended introduction of unnecessary metaphors, for example, 'focusing', in 'spend [...] time focusing on work/life balance'. As already discussed, departures – however slight – from a consistently Clean approach can affect the response. This point is especially pertinent given the overtly metaphoric properties of the research question and its potential for biasing interviewees' responses.

The follow-up interviews, which (intentionally) mixed two kinds of information gathering (reflection on the interview process, and further investigation of an individual's metaphors), yielded information that, while still of interest for our study, was noticeably less Clean.

7.2 Patience and persistence

We note that eliciting a person's way of assessing a concept such as WLB is not a job for a novice. The quality of information obtained in this study is directly related to the competence of the interviewer.

For example, when exploring participants' perceptions of 'balance', sometimes the interviewer requires patience and persistence in order for an overt metaphor to emerge. It was not until two-thirds of the way through the interview that Interviewee A produced their 'completed or joined circle' metaphor. On the other hand, F came up with 'juggling' at the very beginning of the interview.

This variation is common and requires the interviewer to ask questions in a way that paces the interviewees' awareness of the metaphoric aspects of their experience. Interviewees who tend to give specific examples or abstract descriptions may take a while before they connect with a metaphor, but once they do it can become an important source of self-knowledge.

7.3 Multiple levels of application

The expert analyst pointed out that Clean Language was being used in this project in four distinct ways, in order of increasing complexity, as shown in Table 3.

| Level | Description |
|--|---|
| 1. A questioning technique | Making use of Clean Language questions as technical elements within any interview method and context, in order to minimise the introduction of the researcher's metaphors and constructs. |
| 2. A method of eliciting interviewee-generated metaphors | Using Clean Language questions tactically within an interview, in order to elicit metaphors and metaphoric material. |
| 3. A means of 'in the moment' modelling by the interviewer (during the interview) of an individual's metaphor landscapes | Using Clean Language for modelling, ie to elicit and map out the interviewee's metaphor landscape, emphasising connections and relationships between metaphors as well as the metaphors themselves. |
| 4. A coherent research strategy that guides the researcher before, during and after the interview | Using Clean principles to guide the entire research process including formulating the research question and reviewing features and patterns of the total data. |

Table 3: Progressive levels of 'Clean' in interview-based research

In addition, Clean Language principles also apply to the analysis of transcripts at any of the levels shown in Table 3, such that the analysis stays faithful to the interviewee's metaphors, with minimal interpretation of the interviewee's subjective world.

These distinctions underline the importance in future research of knowing which level of application is intended within any project.

7.4 What was it like for participants to be interviewed using Clean Language?

The follow-up interviews provided useful evidence of the interviewees' experience of Clean Language as a research technique.

All of the interviewees had remembered their main metaphors, with some deriving real benefit from the experience of exploring, describing and drawing their metaphor landscapes.

The majority of participants stated that they had enjoyed the interviews and gained valuable insights into their personal metaphors relating to WLB.

You had to think about it quite deeply [...] [It was] quite thought-provoking. [...] it definitely felt different from how you can normally be interviewed. (Interviewee C)

Some interviewees reported that they had had no difficulty at all with the approach; others who did have some difficulty stated that they found it easier to answer the questions as the interview progressed.

Some reported that following the initial interview they had spent time considering their current WLB, with a growing awareness of it. In some cases participants had taken a decision to make changes, even if the follow-up interview was too soon after the initial interview for them to have made the changes yet.

I've had a busy couple of weeks [...] so in the back of my mind actually I haven't got a balance at the moment [...] it certainly made me [...] more aware of it [WLB] and actually [...] a desire to take more control of it for myself. (Interviewee E)

I found it quite therapeutic [...] I actually thought it [...] benefited me in some way. [...] I already sort of knew [...] it wasn't the perfect circle [...] I think it's made me realize more about my own personal life and maybe I – I need to – to sort out my own personal life [...] talking to someone has made me [...] accept it more, yes, which then allows me to [...] make a decision - make changes. (Interviewee A)

So I can see that I'll be able to get things back in balance and I'll be able to you know, spend a bit more time looking after myself or whatever, you know, and not just worrying about other people [...] the general realisation that [...] I did seem to focus on boulders coming down mountains rather than surfing [*laughs*] you realise [...] work isn't everything [*laughs*] you know, senior people will just [...] keep driving you hard until you're in a mess if you're not careful [...] so I'm not going to let that happen. (Interviewee B)

Other participants reported that they had already made changes in their life to redress their current WLB as a result of the initial interview.

[...] the few weekends [...] since then have been really good [...]
I have the conversation with my wife [...] about the fact that
you know, Friday night is my switch and it's quite useful [...] by
getting the difference between the weekends and the weeks,
not just means that I enjoy my weekends more, it also means
that I'm in a better state to - keep going all through the week.
(Interviewee D)

There are [...] times when I thought, 'Actually yes it is working,
and now I realise that it's – it's not working' [...] I've been able
to [...] distance myself from the situation, [...] stand back, think
about what's happening, which perhaps I might not have done
before [...] it's actually just increased my knowledge that I can
make changes [...] a sense that it is within my capacity to make
the changes necessary to – to make it work rather than feeling
that you're helpless. (Interviewee F)

While personal change is normally a goal of Clean Language applied
in a coaching or therapeutic context, it was not pursued
intentionally within this research study. Such changes may be an
interesting and potentially important by-product of a Clean
Language research interview.

7.5 Implications for researchers

While academic and market researchers might believe that they already use a close equivalent of a Clean approach, for example through eliciting open-ended feedback, noting metaphors, or including verbatim quotes to support analysis, we contend that a Clean approach offers a distinctive approach which holds certain advantages.

The most comprehensive application for purposes would be 'Clean all the way through', applying equally to the construction of the research question, the way the topic is introduced and the interview framed, the precision of the interview questions, and the analysis and reporting.

8 Conclusions

Our general conclusions are that:

- We believe that this study has fulfilled its aim of pioneering research into Clean Language.
- The report provides evidence that interviews carried out by an interviewer experienced in Clean Language can generate new insights into the experience of individual participants, and into the understanding of the nature of WLB.
- The study has demonstrated the benefits of using Clean Language as a research tool and, potentially, as an overarching methodology extending to all aspects of the research project.

Conclusions about work-life balance are that:

- People have unique, dynamic and highly personal metaphors for their experience.
- While participants conveyed their sense of relationship between different domains of life in varying ways, these domains were not necessarily categorised as 'work' and 'life'.
- Participants were not necessarily seeking to achieve 'balance'. The explicit metaphor of 'balance' appeared only rarely, even though many of the participants' metaphors implied a notion of *balancing*.

The study has yielded valuable insights into the use of Clean Language as research technique for investigating people's inner worlds. It demonstrates how Clean Language can be used as:

- A questioning technique that avoids introducing the researcher's metaphors into the interviewee's account.
- A method for eliciting interviewee-generated metaphors.
- A process for eliciting 'models' derived from each individual's metaphors.
- An overarching research strategy.

The study also emphasises the importance of using Clean principles to analyse interview transcripts such that the researcher's interpretation of the interviewee's subjective world is minimised.

Findings about the experience of being an interviewee are that:

- Interviewees found the Clean approach helpful and, either initially or as the interview progressed, comfortable.
- There was evidence that participants recalled the metaphors they had explored in the initial interviews.
- Some participants had made spontaneous changes as a result of the interviews.

We offer the following implications for practice:

- Line managers, Human Resource managers and coaches seeking to develop WLB policies or to support individual employees with WLB issues will gain valuable insight through

being aware of individuals' metaphors and metaphor landscapes.

- Industry researchers, such as market researchers, and academic researchers can incorporate Clean Language into their research practice in a variety of ways, on a spectrum from questioning technique to overarching research methodology, in order to enhance the accuracy of their findings.

Next, the project team plans to:

- Produce an article reporting the study for an academic research journal.
- Develop proposals for a more substantial project.
- Seek opportunities to apply the findings of this project in practice.

We welcome contact from potential partners who wish to explore any of these opportunities.

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10 Appendix A: Whose 'edge'? An example of 'non-Clean' use of metaphor in academic research

A study by Berger (2004) re-analyses interviews with mature students on a master's program at George Mason University in order to probe the nature of personal transformations experienced by these students as a result of taking the programme.

The following excerpts (Berger 2004:341) relate to one of these students, Kathleen, 'an articulate executive for whom stability has been the norm. A white woman in her mid-50's, she is at the height of her career in the government. Then... with a change of administration she is unexpectedly asked to step down from the influential position she has had for many years.'

The researcher asks the following question (we have italicised the more obvious metaphors used by the interviewer and by Kathleen):

I ask her whether she wishes she were in a different *place in her life*... (using the metaphor 'place in her life' would be an example of 'non-Clean' practice in questioning *unless* Kathleen has already introduced this term).

Kathleen replies as follows:

No, I think this is the *journey*. And I could stay in this [uncertain space], I think, forever.... I don't know what to say, it *just feels like it will emerge*. But no, where I am right now feels very much

like – it doesn't feel like *a hiatus*. It feels like it is the *journey* and that work will emerge from this place.

Berger comments in the article:

In this excerpt, it is clear that Kathleen is *on the edge* of her knowing. She *stumbles, stammers, circles back...* After admitting that she doesn't know, Kathleen seems more *comfortable...* Perhaps she *finds some footing* within the *slippery place* of her own uncertainty.

From a Clean Language perspective, the metaphor used by Berger look entirely extraneous to Kathleen. Indeed, the divergence from Kathleen's words, and her world, is striking. Both the 'inner landscape' itself and the quality of movement within it are re-interpreted to such a degree by the researcher, we suggest, as to risk misrepresenting the interviewee significantly.

It is notable the metaphor of an 'edge' (of knowing) is mentioned no less than one hundred and four times in Berger's article; not once does this metaphor appear in the interviewee data cited in the article. This supports the desirability of distinguishing clearly between metaphors introduced by a researcher as an interpretive device, and those that originate in, belong to, and faithfully represent, interviewees' subjective worlds.

11 Appendix B: Project Team

Paul Tosey, project leader

Paul is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Management, University of Surrey, where he is Assistant Director of the Centre for Management Learning. He joined Surrey in 1991 and led the development of the MSc Change Agent Skills and Strategies, an advanced training for consultants and facilitators, which he directed for many years. Career experience includes consultancy, coaching and management, as well as teaching at the University of Edinburgh and the Open University. His research interests include transformative learning and NLP, and his book *A Critical Appreciation of NLP* (2009, co-author Jane Mathison) is published by Palgrave Macmillan. Paul is a certified facilitator of Clean Language.

Wendy Sullivan, project manager

Wendy is an international trainer of Clean Language, a facilitator and consultant. One of the most experienced Clean trainers in the world, Wendy runs Clean Change Company, offering an extensive open training programme and a range of business services including coaching and consultancy. She is a guest lecturer on the University of Surrey's MBA and works one-to-one as a coach and psychotherapist. Her book, *Clean Language: revealing metaphors & opening minds* (2008, co-author Judy Rees) is published by Crown House Publishing Ltd.

Rupert Meese, interviews and transcript analysis

Rupert has a background designing and developing some of the most complex computer systems in the telecoms industry. He came to Clean Language through a passion for working with the complexities of experience. Since 2008 Rupert has run a private symbolic modelling practice, working with individuals who want help exploring their life situation without someone 'taking over'. Rupert

is a writer, web designer, researcher, Reiki practitioner, systems architect, programmer, artist and father.

Margaret Meyer, report writing

Margaret is the Associate Director of Clean Change Company and a change consultant, independent researcher, coach and therapist who uses Clean Language across the span of her work. Margaret's previous experience spans publishing (Hodder & Stoughton), information management (Royal National Institute for the Blind) and the arts (British Council). She has developed special applications of Clean Language for strategic planning, team-building, mediation and for research. With Wendy Sullivan she trains and mentors professionals in the use of Clean Language.

James Lawley, expert analysis

James has been a UKCP registered psychotherapist since 1993 and is co-author of *Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling*. He is an independent researcher who has collaborated on projects with Yale University Child Study Center; the School of Management at the University of Surrey; the Communication and Systems department at the Open University; and the Centre for Sport, Dance and Outdoor Education at Liverpool John Moores University.

Sarah Nixon, academic advisor

Sarah is a Principal Lecturer in Sports Development with PE and teaches on a wide range of courses within the Centre for Sport and Dance. Sarah has a wide range of experience in the sport development and management field, and prior to Liverpool John Moores University she worked in various posts within the leisure industry. Sarah led the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning within the Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure. Sarah's research interests are in personal development planning, learning and teaching and sports management.