Sensemaking Through Metaphors: The Role of Imaginative Metaphor Elicitation in Constructing New Understandings

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Abstract
Drawing on in-depth interviews with exchange and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, we elaborate on the role of Imaginative Metaphor Elicitation (IME) to generate knowledge about participants’ experiences while helping them make sense of and cope with a difficult situation. Imaginative metaphors allow participants to explore feelings, assumptions, and behaviors in non-threatening ways and facilitate introspection and self-awareness. We propose that imaginative metaphors help participants make their experience tangible and accessible, identify problematic assumptions, behaviors, as well as resources available to them. Some reported gaining a renewed sense of empowerment. Simultaneously, IME provides an opportunity to collect rich data while co-creating solutions for and with participants. We contribute to calls for embedding social impact in the research design by highlighting the value of IME in gaining deeper access to participants’ experiences while supporting them in taking an active role in their situations.

Keywords
interviews, social impact, metaphors, sensemaking

Introduction

By using all these metaphors, I understand myself more because once I’m able to put it out into words and say it out loud, then I can actually understand what I’m going through because usually I just wrap it all up inside of my head.

Laura, International Student

The concern with research relevance, usefulness, and social impact is a recurring theme in management (e.g., Nicolai & Seidl, 2010; Pettigrew, 2011), communication studies (Frey, 2009; Hummert, 2009), and more generally in the social sciences (Bastow et al., 2014; Vanclay & Esteves, 2011). Scholars typically conceive impact as a process of translation and communication of research findings. Some exceptions include action research in management and community-based participatory research in the social sciences more broadly.

Action research combines theory and practice in the pursuit of practical solutions to the problem facing an organization or community (Luscher & Lewis, 2008; McNiff, 2017). Community based participatory research involves communities and academics working together to systematize and construct knowledge, analyze injustices, enhance consciousness, work toward solutions to everyday problems, and redress social inequalities toward transformative action for change (Schubotz, 2019). Researchers engage local knowledge systems toward equitable social relations and structures of power (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Gustafson & Brunger, 2014; Tolhurst et al., 2012). The purpose of community-based participatory research is to promote democratic social change and enhance the capacity of communities to determine their future (Singh et al., 2013; Yoshihama & Carr, 2002).

Scholars across the disciplines are increasingly calling for embedding social impact in the research process more broadly (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Frey, 2009; Rossetto, 2014) and in more meaningful ways, keeping with the practices of action research and community based participatory research. In addition to traditional ways of communicating or translating research knowledge to potential research users, some scholars...
Organization development practitioners and coaches have long used metaphors as an intervention strategy, offering clients a metaphor to help them gain insights into their situations (Hunt, 2009a; Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006). A fundamental assumption guiding this line of work is that language is constitutive of action, not only representative (Wittgenstein, 1967), and that metaphors are generative as they can lead to novel perceptions. Jacob and Heracleous (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Jacob & Heracleous, 2006) diverged from the traditional focus of projecting a metaphor on clients by eliciting metaphors from participants. They used building materials (bricks) over whether to stay or leave their existing location, each choice carrying a combination of financial, social, and emotional costs, leading to a severe state of anxiety (Firang, 2020) and the need for sensemaking.

We draw on extensive research on metaphors in organization studies and elaborate on the usefulness of imaginative metaphors (Lackoff & Johnson, 1980) more widely to aid participants’ sensemaking. We propose that IME supports participants to articulate their experience by making it tangible and to identify a way forward by recognizing negative assumptions and behaviors, as well as resources available. This process of introspection and reflection creates a renewed sense of empowerment, stemming from a new understanding of their experience. At the same time, IME supports researchers to collect rich data on participants’ experiences, the problems they face, and the solutions they perceive as viable.

This paper is organized as follows. We start with a discussion of metaphors as a tool for sensemaking. We then illustrate the potential role of imaginative metaphors in creating sensemaking opportunities by describing our study with international and exchange students during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude with a discussion of the potential and challenges of this approach to enhance social impact in research.

Metaphors as a Tool for Sensemaking

Metaphors have received considerable attention in management practice (Hunt, 2009a; Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006), management research (e.g., Cassel & Bishop, 2019; Cornelissen, 2006; Cornelissen et al., 2008, 2011; Morgan, 1986; Schoenborn et al., 2016), communication studies (e.g., Hogler et al., 2008), and the popular press (Geary, 2012) as they are considered central to human discourse and understanding (Cornelissen et al., 2008). Metaphors allow understanding one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). By combining and reorganizing abstract and concrete features, metaphors influence thought processes, attitudes, beliefs, and actions (Geary, 2012). Metaphors are an essential element in sensemaking and a tool to stimulate new understandings and actions (Jacob & Heracleous, 2006), as they supply “language with flexibility, expressibility, and a way to expand the language” (Weick, 1979, p. 47). In this literature, the term metaphor includes other figures of speech, such as metonymy, synecdoche, simile, and analogies.

Drawing on empirical material derived from interviews with 11 exchange and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, we explored the role of Imaginative Metaphor Elicitation (IME) as an interviewing technique to facilitate sensemaking under unusual and challenging circumstances. We found that IME generates knowledge about participants’ experiences while assisting them in taking an active role in resolving or coping with their difficult situation. In this project, we focused our attention on exchange and international students, a group particularly affected by disruptions in international travel. These students faced a significant dilemma
to construct a physical model of participants’ understanding, thus eliciting embodied metaphors.

Similarly, researchers have used metaphors by projecting or eliciting metaphors from research participants (See Cornelissen et al., 2008, for a review). This distinction is also referred to as deductive and inductive metaphors (Palmer & Dunford, 1996). Projecting (i.e., deductive) metaphors are most common (cf. Cassel & Lee, 2012; Tosey et al., 2014) and used to make an abstract concept more understandable and promote a new understanding or a change of perspective. Morgan’s (1986) seminal work presenting organizations through metaphorical lenses (organizations as a machine, organism, brain) is a typical example.

Eliciting metaphors (i.e., inductive approaches) involve identifying metaphors in the language used by research participants and exploring their meaning. These can be further divided into metaphors produced spontaneously by participants without researcher elicitation and metaphors that are purposefully elicited by researchers. Examples of the first type include Cassel and Lee’s (2012) exploration of the metaphorical language-in-use of change agents using interview data with trade unionists and Tracy et al.’s (2006) exploration of metaphors from participants’ descriptions of experiences of bullying at work. Studies deliberately eliciting metaphors include Cassel and Bishop’s (2019) exploration of taxi drivers’ experiences of dignity at work by asking them to complete the sentences “Being a taxi driver is like...” and “Taxi driving is like...” and Nardon and Aten’s (2012) exploration of the acceptance of a novel virtual world by asking participants to describe virtual worlds in terms of other things.

Most studies eliciting metaphors simply ask participants what the experience or object under investigation is like. A notable exception is Tosey and colleagues (2014), who explored the potential of “Clean Language” for eliciting naturally occurring metaphors. Clean language originates from the therapeutic work of David Grove, focusing on resolving clients’ traumatic memories (Grove & Panzer, 1991; Lawlwy & Tompkins, 2000). It aims to keep the language of the therapist or interviewer as clean as possible to avoid contaminating the interaction with their own metaphors. By keeping the language clean and using the participants’ language and metaphors, the practitioner facilitates the elicitation and elaboration of the clients’ symbolic understanding of their experience. While clean language techniques are powerful to elicit metaphors, their application requires special training (Tosey et al., 2014).

With a few exceptions (e.g., Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Jacob & Heracleous, 2006; Tosey et al., 2014), the use of metaphors in management and communication research is primarily concerned with generating knowledge in support of research goals (e.g., answer a research question, provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon) with little consideration to the impact of metaphors on research participants. We propose metaphors are a useful tool to facilitate sensemaking during the interview process, allowing participants to find their own solutions to their problems and to cope with challenging situations. At the same time, researchers collect rich empirical data while making some impact on participants’ lives.

Understanding International Students Experience of COVID-19 Through Imaginative Metaphors

This project originated from personal conversations with students and our desire to conduct socially meaningful research to better understand the challenges facing international and exchange students (hereafter referred to as international students) during the COVID-19 pandemic. International students encountered closed borders, social isolation, financial uncertainty, housing challenges, and a general lack of social support, as academic institutions took drastic actions to reduce the spread of the virus. We approached this study with the understanding that students were experiencing an unprecedented situation, were likely experiencing social and psychological distress (Firang, 2020), and in need of support to make sense of their situation and find ways to cope. Our intention was to better understand their issues using an interview approach that would also be supportive of them. With this goal in mind, we explored the role of IME as a sensemaking tool.

Interview Protocol

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identified two types of metaphors. Conventional metaphors are built in language and provide a coherent structure for experience. They are shared within a language community and sometimes are not recognized as a metaphor (e.g., she is a top performer). New metaphors are personal, imaginative, and creative, and allow for a new understanding of experience by highlighting some things and hiding others. Given our focus on individual sensemaking, we draw on the latter.

Articulating metaphors supports the participant by making unconscious drivers and subjective experiences visible and concrete. Metaphors condense information and make subjective experiences tangible and easier to work with (Sullivan & Rees, 2008). We used two types of metaphors: (1) the current way of being metaphor, seen as a catalyst to freshly see themselves (Hunt, 2009b) and (2) an alternative way of being metaphor to provide them with a vision of what is possible, offering an alternative way forward (Hunt, 2009a).

Our approach above is informed by metaphor use in coaching situations (Hunt, 2009a, 2009b). We diverge slightly from coaching tradition by giving participants full control over the process; the metaphors were elicited from the participants and not provided by the researcher. We conceived of our roles as co-researchers and partners in an intersubjective encounter to co-construct meaning (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012; Rossetto, 2014) and assumed that participants are experts in their lives (Mitchell et al., 2007). Additionally, we sought to make the method accessible to researchers without coaching or therapeutic training, provided standard ethical considerations for in-depth research interviews apply.
We started our conversation by exploring individuals’ subjective experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section of the interview is akin to traditional open-ended interviews in which the researcher attempts to develop a rapport with participants and learn about their world. We kept this section focused on their experience of the pandemic, and the main challenges participants were experiencing. At this first stage of the conversation, we probed for patterns and behaviors related to the challenges they had identified. Once participants identified the main challenges, we invited them to identify a goal or desire to discuss further. Participants were informed of this in the recruitment email, which asked them to prepare a goal or desire to discuss further. Participants were informed of this in the recruitment email, which asked them to prepare a developing statement, setting up the conversation’s expectations and parameters. The interaction with Tim, an exchange student, illustrates the move to articulating a goal.

Researcher: Maybe this is a good time for us to move to the second part of this conversation. What is it that you would like to be able to do, given the situation?

Tim: I was thinking about this for a while now. It’s about accepting. That’s a really hard thing to do. Because I understand that accepting is a really good step in terms of coping. But it’s hard for me to accept the fact that this was an exchange year that I’ve been looking forward to for the past 3 years. And I’ve been working, like, 50–60 hours a week in the summertime just to save up for it. I put in a lot of work, and I’ve gotten some good grades. I tried my best at school to get to the position that I want to be. And then, all of a sudden, it just feels like, boom. It had to end. Within a few hours, I had to, basically, pack up and leave. So, it’s the idea of not leaving on my own terms and not having the proper goodbyes that I wanted. So, that’s the hardest part.

We then worked together to identify an achievable goal or desire under his control. In Tim’s case, the notion of accepting evolved to a more targeted goal of being “better able to find satisfaction in virtual connections,” as it was particularly difficult for him to accept that he was away from his girlfriend and close friends.

Once we reached an agreement on a goal, we elicited a current way metaphor from participants through successive questioning and inviting participants to elaborate the metaphor in as much detail as possible, as illustrated in the example below. Emily, an exchange student, was feeling anxious about her decision to stay in Germany during the pandemic. Her goal was “to be better able to make decisions and to be comfortable with the uncertainty associated with these decisions.”

Researcher: When you are in this moment where you are making decisions, and you are feeling these emotions, and there is all this uncertainty and this ambiguity, what is it like? What are the images that come to you?

Emily: I am kind of going through the images that are popping in my head, and a storm came into my head. But I wouldn’t necessarily say it is like that because I don’t think it is that dramatic.

Researcher: A storm. That is the image that came to you.

Emily: Yes, but there is nothing that is innately dangerous about the situation. I just think about it as fuzzy or messy. And I just have to put it back in order. But a storm is kind of uncontrollable, but my emotions are controllable.

Researcher: So, who are you in this storm? When there is this storm, what are you doing?

Emily: I don’t know. I kind of feel pretty small.

Researcher: Are you watching it? Are you hiding from it? Are you walking on it?

Emily: I am just right outside in it... I guess when I thought about it, I was just, I guess, walking and overthinking.

We continued the process of elaborating the metaphor (thoughtful walker in a storm) by probing for assumptions and beliefs guiding her understanding and behavioral patterns that emerge from this understanding.

Researcher: What are the assumptions that guide this thoughtful storm walker? Something like, as long as I keep thinking, then what?

Emily: I will eventually come up with a solution.

Researcher: What are her actions? You just said a few things. So, she stays in the storm. She thinks a lot. She gathers information.

Emily: I don’t know if it is an important detail, but I am imagining her alone. I imagine that goes with my emotions. Like I feel alone. Because each person has their own very unique situation and the decision that is best for you isn’t necessarily the one that the person next to you makes. So, it is a very individual, I wouldn’t say lost feeling but like alone feeling.

Imaginative metaphors provided participants with an opportunity to articulate their experience and explore assumptions and behaviors embedded in the way they were making sense of their situation. Once we reached saturation depicting their current way of experiencing the pandemic and no new information emerged, we followed the same procedures to support participants in imagining an alternative way metaphor and open the door to new understandings and actions to emerge. Once the alternative way metaphor was fully described, we asked participants to identify steps they could take right away or an action plan. These two components of the conversation provided participants the most benefit, as will be discussed in the next section.

Data Collection and Analysis

All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams by the first author, who is a certified integral master coach.1 We
interviewed six Canadian students on exchange abroad (five of them in Europe and one in South America) and five international students in Canada. The international students were from Nigeria, Iran, India, South Africa, and Vietnam. We gave all students Anglo-Saxon pseudonyms for added anonymity. The interviews lasted between 52 and 120 minutes.

After completing each interview, the researcher took detailed process and content notes, which were used to inform weekly discussions with the research team. We analyzed the data using an inductive, grounded approach, allowing initial analyses and findings to inform further data collection and subsequent iterations of analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Locke, 2001). We prepared a summary of each interview and comparative tables between and across interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, we wrote memos throughout the data collection and analysis process, exploring our evolving understanding of the method’s influences on participants.

We engaged in an iterative process of coding and theorizing (Gioia et al., 2013), exploring the role of each element of the interview on participants. The authors engaged with the dataset and read the transcripts multiple times, discussing the coding scheme regularly and agreeing on new codes by consensus. Through multiple iterations, we categorized the benefits perceived and identified by participants according to the different steps of the interview protocol, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the next section, we elaborate in detail our results on the benefits gained by engaging with IME.

**Benefits of IME**

As elaborated below, the benefits of IME are (1) articulating and reconceptualizing experience by making it tangible, (2) identifying problematic assumptions and behaviors, as well as resources available, and (3) gaining a renewed sense of empowerment to cope with challenging situations.

**Articulating and Reconceptualizing Experience by Making It Tangible**

We found that when participants developed a metaphor depicting their experience, they noticed their behaviors in new ways. For example, Lily surprised herself by describing her current way of dealing with her need for a job during the pandemic as an *Entitled Person Waiting at the Door*.

**Researcher:** When you are there thinking, boy, it would be nice if I would get a job, I need to find out more about it. What is going on in your mind...?

**Lily:** I think a metaphor that works perfectly is for you to knock on the door, and the door shall be opened. Don’t just stand there and wait for the door to be open for you, I think. Does that make sense?

**Researcher:** Yes. So, it’s like you stand in front of the door. You wait but not...

**Lily:** Wait for them to open it for you, but you’re not there to knock on it yourself. Wow.

Lily was able to see herself in a new light through her metaphorical exploration. The metaphor of the Entitled Person Waiting at the Door revealed to her the passivity of her actions—“waiting for the door to be opened”—as opposed to taking a more active role in achieving her goal—“knocking.” She explains:

**Lily:** I think once we started with the metaphors, that’s when I started to see things in hindsight... The metaphors helped put me into some fictional character instead of putting it in myself. I don’t think anyone wants to say that, oh, I am entitled. I was able to put this character who kind of looks like me and is kind of like me. I’m able to say, oh, this person looks entitled. Yes, it definitely made things easier to see myself, not really me, but looking at someone who’s like me.
The metaphor allowed her to make the experience tangible and less threatening—“a character who kind of looks like me and is kind of like me”—and help Lily think about her actions without judgment and fear. Through a process of imagination and symbolic representation, she realized that her stumbling block was a sense of entitle and fear. A good relief, I'm not going to lie. Because I never would have thought of it that way. And it’s good to express that because I think there is a feeling when we discovered that when we went through the navigation part and everything, the idea of feeling alone, that really resonated in me. Because there’s a lot of loneliness going on.

As we explored his feeling of loneliness from being literally and metaphorically on the other side of the ocean, he came to recognize his assumption that face-to-face encounters are critical for connection. He reflected on his obsession to “cross the ocean.”

Because that idea of accepting...I know there’s nothing better than human connection. And that’s my stubbornness or something. And it’s hard to really get over that, that jump.

By becoming aware of their assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors, participants reflected and reconsidered their usefulness and appropriateness in the current situation, opening the door for alternative conceptualizations. And “that’s my stubbornness” indicates a realization that perhaps the assumption was no longer serving Tim well.

**Gaining a Renewed Sense of Empowerment**

When participants were able to identify an alternative way of making sense of their situation, they could identify new ways forward. For instance, Tim was able to imagine a new metaphor where a connection was possible from a distance by imagining a *Far-reaching Satellite* as a way to cope with the limited mobility imposed by measures to curb the spread of COVID-19.

**Identifying Assumptions, Behaviors, and Resources**

Metaphors were particularly helpful in getting participants out of the limitations of their current understanding and imagine alternative ways forward, changing their mental models. Through introspection and the identification of their current way metaphor, participants identified a key element, belief, or behavior that held them back, enhancing self-awareness. As we explored with Tim, his metaphor of the Lost Sailor articulated his feeling of loneliness and his assumption that he had to be face-to-face with someone to establish a connection.

**Researcher:** So, when you are trying to get to the other side, is the other side that place of connection? What is on the other side of the ocean?

**Tim:** Definitely, yes, that connection. And, also, friends and people that you can get close to. Even a hug would be nice. Oh, my God. And, also, that idea of getting to the other side. It’s like a new world. It’s opening your arms up again and feeling like you can be yourself, right?

**Researcher:** So, if you don’t get to the other side, you are alone?

**Tim:** Yes. [pause]

**Researcher:** Yes. Okay. How does that feel?

**Tim:** A good relief, I’m not going to lie. Because I never would have thought of it that way. And it’s good to express that because I think there is a feeling when we discovered that when we went through the navigation part and everything, the idea of feeling alone, that really resonated in me. Because there’s a lot of loneliness going on.

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**Researcher:** What image comes to you that shows connection is possible, even when far away?

**Tim:** Satellite.

**Researcher:** Okay. So, let’s think of an adjective for the satellite.

**Tim:** Well, broad. Like, its connection spreads everywhere.

**Researcher:** Far-reaching?

**Tim:** Far-reaching, yes. I like that. That’s good.

**Researcher:** ...So, the way of the far-reaching satellite. So, what does this far-reaching satellite assumes and thinks?

**Tim:** I mean, at the end of the day, it assumes and thinks only about one thing. It’s just to connect people or to connect things. It establishes that connection.

**Researcher:** So, as long as the conditions are right?

**Tim:** Yes. So, long as there’s not, like, a meteor or something hits it, which is very doubtful. But anyways, yes. It’s pretty good.

**Researcher:** That connects people. What else does the far-reaching satellite think?

**Tim:** So, it connects people, and it...I don’t know. It keeps going. I like that. It just floats around the earth and just chills. And does its job and...Yes. It doesn’t feel anything. It only has one purpose, and I feel like it’s proud of doing that purpose.

**Researcher:** As long as I keep flowing, the connection is not broken.

**Tim:** Yes. That’s good, that’s good. No, that hits me. That’s good. That’s really good.

Tim realized that given the circumstances, he needed to rethink the way he achieved connection to others, what he
named “receiving the signals.” Tim reflected on the change in mindset that the two metaphors had allowed him:

Tim: What I love about this conversation is that the answer comes from within... The fact that I can think about the situation... Because it’s the same one, whether I’m in the boat or I’m on the satellite. So that situation is not changing. But I’m still keeping going, and my mindset, kind of, switched a bit, you know? Not just a bit, but by a lot. I feel like I’m going to go through this situation and have good days and have that connection regardless. I think that’s really important.

Tim found the answer to his problem within. This signals that the point of departure for IME is that participants are experts in their own lives; therefore, guided introspection can enhance self-awareness toward the construction of new meaning, bringing about a sense of empowerment. Tim confirms a “switch” and confidence in experiencing “good days.” He recognized that through awareness and changing his mindset, he could keep a connection, something that was important to him.

Emily agreed and explained how the metaphors allowed her to see beyond her current understanding.

Emily: I think that again, the metaphor idea is really good. I like that. And I like how we focus on first making a metaphor of how you currently feel. And seeing the challenges from that situation and referring to that instead of I think this, and I feel this. And it kind of makes you think. Sometimes, I was like, that seems really foolish. Why am I thinking about it? But then what you said, it is not judgmental; we are just putting it out there. And then when we made the new one, I could reflect on why I didn’t think that was such a good idea.

By exploring their current situation and a new alternative, participants felt empowered to better understand their situation and use their new understanding (articulated through imagining metaphors) to develop alternatives that worked for them. Therefore, metaphors became a self-empowerment tool, which is vital in situations where individuals feel powerless, or as Emily said, “foolish.” This renewed sense of empowerment can also be useful in shifting the acknowledged power imbalance in traditional social science research (Anyan, 2013; Hoffman, 2007; Karnielli-Miller et al., 2009) toward a more meaningful and intentional co-production of knowledge.

**Beyond Understanding—Toward Action**

IME in interviews provides a venue to enrich participants’ experience by providing them with opportunities for introspection, reflection, and enhanced self-awareness. The key benefit for participants comes from moving beyond reflecting on their problems toward a solution they can implement, which is critical in gaining a sense of empowerment. After reflecting on an alternative way, actionable steps came easily to participants, as Tim’s excerpt below illustrates.

**Researcher:** What could you do now, today, or in the next few days to become more like the far-reaching satellite? What are actions that you could take, right away, to become more like the satellite?

**Tim:** I would say, just be a bit more open to individuals wanting to communicate and stuff like that. But not only that but also me, myself. I could take the initiative to call people and stuff like that. But what’s more, I think that comes with the satellite thing. Because I still talk to people on a daily basis and everything. But it’s that idea of a mindset, right? It’s that idea that instead of thinking, oh, I’m talking to someone, but it’s only a whisper of the wind on the ocean. I could start thinking about it, like, no. This is a real connection, happening in real-time. And it’s from the grace of the satellite thing, you know? Instead of thinking of any kind of conversation, whether I put it out there or whether I receive it, just thinking about the conversation as a marvelous aspect. That is much better than thinking of it as a hopeless wind that you think is a voice, but it’s just a wind in the night on the ocean.

...I think I’m going to make some phone calls right now.

Similarly, Lily felt empowered to act as she identified very concrete actions she could take:

**Researcher:** What do you think you can do to start being like a trusting car mechanic?

**Lily:** Definitely reach out to preferably ISSO [International Student Service Office]. Yes, I think that’s the first step. Just sending an email. It doesn’t even have to be a virtual video chat. Definitely searching on the internet, looking for different resources for international students, but I think the most important is you actually asking directly what your question is instead of looking for the generic information that everyone finds... Yes. I’m feeling much better. I think it’s something I can definitely implement.

She reflected on the process and how this simple step opened the door for her.

Everybody has been asking me [about my problems], and I would say the same thing over and over. Before this conversation, we never spoke of any solutions or anything. Now I know I can have solutions to this.

The process of relying on the participants’ strengths and resources and asking questions that lead the participant to think about what they wanted and what they could do, expanded their awareness of the options available and empowered them to take action (Warner, 2013). Imaginative metaphors allowed
participants to see their experiences in a tangible, less threatening, and non-judgmental way—I (subject) is made visible and available, negative assumptions and behaviors are identified, and new capacities and capabilities can be developed (action plan). Participants feel empowered through this process of “seeing” and can be in charge of their own lives and actions, which is paramount for making sense of and coping with an unprecedented and evolving situation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our goal in this article was to discuss the potential of IME to support research participants while collecting rich data to co-create knowledge, thereby embedding social impact goals within the research design that go beyond translating and communicating research beyond the academic arena. In line with research suggesting that experience is encoded symbolically (Tosey et al., 2014), we found that metaphors made it easier for participants to articulate their experience without fear and judgment. As described above, IME helped participants make their experience tangible and accessible and identify problematic assumptions or behavior, as well as personal resources to deal with their challenges. Through generating metaphors, they were able to change their mindset, gain a renewed sense of empowerment, and develop an action plan, progressing from an accessible experience to a tangible outcome. From a research point of view, participants’ articulation of metaphors provided rich insight into their experiences and insights into possible solutions in ways that likely go beyond traditional interview methods (Durkin et al., 2020; Hewitt, 2007; Nun-kooising, 2005).

We contribute to the emerging calls for embedding social impact in research design by highlighting IME’s value in gaining more in-depth access to participants’ experiences while supporting them in taking an active role in their situations. The use of metaphors facilitates the communication of personal feelings and experiences by focusing on concrete descriptions. For instance, Tim’s feelings of loneliness or Lily’s feelings of frustrated entitlement became available and safe to discuss as they explored their experiences metaphorically. In turn, the process raised awareness of their current conceptualizations and opened the door to new understandings, enhancing their self-awareness and sense of empowerment.

We argue that IME is a powerful and empowering method to understand novel and emotionally charged experiences by symbolically representing urgent or difficult challenges and making them more manageable toward tangible outcomes (action plans). We argue that IME is particularly helpful when participants are facing unprecedented situations that require sensemaking and a change in mindset. In this paper, we demonstrate its relevance among international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, more research is required to establish this method’s usefulness to increase social impact in research in other contexts, populations, and types of problems/crises. In particular, more research is needed regarding variations in individuals’ ability to introspect and engage in symbolic reasoning. The students we interviewed are attending post-secondary education in Canada and are accustomed to reflective thinking. Individuals from other cultures or educational backgrounds may find metaphorical engagement less attractive or informative.

In addition, we found that the application of the method requires a skilled interviewer, able to establish a relationship of trust with participants and navigate the uncertainties associated with symbolic exploration. Given the method’s potential to elicit feelings and breakthroughs, we caution novice researchers to seek training and support prior to using IME to support research participants. With this article, we hope to motivate further research on how interview tools can be modified to support research goals while also supporting participants, thereby increasing the social impact of research throughout the research process.

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Note

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