Metaphors are pervasive in everyday language, thoughts and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The field of sport psychology, and more explicitly practitioner-client dialogue, remain exposed to such communication. Despite the prevalence of metaphor in our daily interactions, metaphorical discourse is often ignored, or unknowingly used in therapeutic settings (Jinks, 2006). However, noticing a client’s use of metaphor may provide an opportunity to work within the athlete’s metaphorical landscape (i.e., the sum total of their symbolic perceptions, Lawley & Tomkins, 2000) to facilitate therapeutic change (Kopp, 1995). Based upon established mainstream approaches, the present article proposes a composite framework for working with client generated metaphors in sport psychology practice (cf. Kopp, 1995; Lawley & Tomkins, 2000; Sims, 2003). The framework is contextualized through an exploration of case examples derived from the authors’ experiences of working within the metaphorical landscape of a series of clients. The article concludes with various implications for the work and training of applied sport psychologists.
A metaphor essentially carries meaning from one thing or place to another, with the term being derived from the Greek, *meta* meaning “above”, and *pherein* meaning “to carry or bear” (Kopp, 1998).

Metaphors are used frequently in our internal and external dialogue, and are suggested to be particularly synonymous with content of an emotionally charged nature (Kopp, 1998). They are considered to represent deep, tacit, prelogical levels of knowledge (Kopp & Craw, 1998), and be pervasive in everyday life; not only in language, but in thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, when athletes use phrases such as: “I was totally in the groove”; or “I'm going to crack under the pressure of it all”; or “I’ve got a knot in my stomach” their use of language creates an image to communicate their intended meaning, feelings and experience to the listener. Indeed, athletes often use metaphors to describe their thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, behaviors and actions when conversing in applied settings (Hanin & Stambulova, 2002). Further, the use of metaphorical language has been associated with the athlete forming a deep understanding of the self and their interactions with the surrounding environment (Hanin & Stambulova, 2002).

Despite the prevalence of metaphors in our linguistic dialogue, Jinks (2006) suggested that within therapeutic settings metaphorical communication is often ignored. This may be the result of practitioners assuming a shared understanding of what the “knot in the stomach” represents, and thus proceeding as though the client had described feelings of tightness or tension (Jinks, 2006). This propensity to blithely continue as if the client had said—not what they did say—but what the practitioner had prematurely concluded they meant, can emerge as an obstacle to the success of applied work (Sims, 2003).

Noticing a client’s use of a metaphor may provide an opportunity to work within the client’s metaphorical landscape (i.e., the sum total of the client’s symbolic perceptions in which various metaphors coexist in a larger context, Lawley & Tompkins, 2000) unlocking new possibilities for therapeutic change (Kopp, 1995). Indeed, Adams (1997) proposed that once individuals become aware of their use of metaphorical language, they can consciously decide to live certain metaphors or, if required, change those metaphors for others, thus changing them self. Exploring the use of effective metaphorical language has also been associated with several positive consequences for both the client and therapeutic environment. Specifically, metaphor has emerged as a powerful mechanism when seeking to alter a client’s experience in ways that promote adaptation and positive self-regard (Sims, 2003). Effective use of metaphorical language has also been associated with gaining efficient access and entry to the client’s world and has thus been linked with strengthening the alliance and rapport between practitioner and client (Sims, 2003).

For example, Ottati, Rhoads and Graesser (1999) found that using metaphorical language increased intrinsic interest in communication when the metaphor “resonated” with the listener’s interests and attachments. Although these examples all rest within the context of mainstream therapies, tentative exploration of metaphor use can be found within sport psychology literature. To date, this exploration has included the work of Hanin and associates (e.g., Hanin, 2000; Hanin & Stambulova, 2002; Ruiz & Hanain, 2004) and the application of their Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning Model (IZOF; see Robazza, 2006 for review). Specifically, self-generated metaphor has been proffered as a highly effective approach when creating the idiosyncratic emotional profile of an athlete within the application
of IZOF model (Robazza, 2006). In short, establishing the emotional profile of an athlete within the IZOF model relies heavily on retrospective accounts of the performers optimal and dysfunctional preperformance states. Hanin and colleagues proposed that the symbolization encapsulated within metaphorical discourse allows the performer to more readily and accurately access images that are meaningful to the individual when creating an emotional profile. They have therefore encouraged the use of metaphorical language within emotional profiling as exploration of this type of discourse allows the succinct and vivid capture of experiential information that is notably difficult to recount (Robazza, 2006; Ruiz & Hanin, 2004).

Metaphorical descriptions have also been explored within various sporting settings. First, across a series of qualitative studies examining imagery use in dance, the utilization of metaphors has emerged as a key aspect of imagery effectiveness (e.g., Hanrahan & Vergeer, 2000; Nordin & Cumming, 2005; Overby, Hall, & Haslam, 1998). Within these studies, the integration of metaphorical descriptions of movement (e.g., for the theme of a dance piece) self-generated by the dancers was perceived to improve imagery effectiveness. Second, within coaching settings, metaphors have been explored with respect to their uses in enhancing the impact of verbal instructions in the acquisition of dance skills (e.g., Sawada, Mori, & Ishii, 2002). Sawada et al. (2002) noted that performers given coach/practitioner generated metaphorical verbal instructions were better able to recognize and perform dance skills in comparison with performers given specific verbal instruction.

Poolton, Masters, and Maxwell (2007) explored how culturally appropriate metaphorical descriptions can enhance motor learning when compared with more traditional coaching approaches. Within their study, Poolton et al. (2007) concluded that those performers taught a skill via metaphor/analogy accrued less explicit knowledge of the movement than those individuals taught via explicit teaching methods. When learners in this study were subsequently placed under additional task loading during performance (i.e., counting backward in 3s) it was found that the secondary task disrupted the explicit learners, but not those taught via metaphor/analogy learning. Similar findings had also been demonstrated by Liao and Masters (2001), who found that learners taught via metaphorical descriptions were not negatively affected by a stress intervention (i.e., via ego threatening feedback), or thought suppression techniques when compared with an explicit learning group. Further contemporary research (e.g., Lam, Maxwell, & Masters, 2009) has suggested that individuals taught via analogy/metaphor use more implicit or unconscious modes of movement control than those taught via explicit instruction. Finally, Jones (2003), advised that using practitioner or coach generated metaphors could be adopted as a literary technique to encourage athletes to identify alternative ways of viewing and dealing with situations. Jones noted that practitioner generated metaphor can thus be used to engage the athlete in the process of demystification and altering both primary and secondary appraisals within the stress process (Jones, 2003).

Although the above studies highlight the inclusion of metaphoric dialogue within sport psychology settings, one major limitation can be forwarded with respect to how metaphors have been used. Specifically, most studies applying the use of metaphors have done so using practitioner rather than client generated metaphors (e.g., Jones, 2003; Lam et al., 2009; Liao & Masters, 2001; Poolton et al., 2007; Sawada et al., 2002). This seems at odds with way in which dancers have noted using metaphorical description (Hanrahan & Vergeer, 2000; Nordin &
Cuming, 2005; Overby, Hall, & Haslam, 1998), and the suggested use of metaphors within Hanin and colleagues IZOF model. These two approaches seem to emphasize the importance of developing client rather than practitioner generated metaphors. Further, structured metaphoric frameworks within other domains of psychology favor the integration of client generated metaphors over those devised or imposed by the practitioner. In short, Kopp’s (1995) Metaphor Therapy, Lawley and Tompkins’s (2000) Clean Language therapeutic approach, and Sims’s (2003) Six Stage Model each operate firmly within the client’s metaphorical landscape. These structured frameworks allow the exploration of metaphorical language within client practitioner settings using a client centered philosophy and can be used to assist intervention choice and content (Kopp & Craw, 1998).

The three frameworks outlined above share numerous common features with Brief Contact therapies (de Shazer, 1985). Although Brief Contact therapies have received some exposure within sport psychology settings (e.g., Giges & Petitpas, 2000; Høiggaard & Johansen, 2004) intervention literature within our domain tends to be dominated by a rather narrow philosophy of service delivery (Bond, 2002; Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, & Maynard, 2007; Ravizza, 2002). Specifically, the vast majority of sport psychology literature has typically contained information and advice on the application of psychological skills training (PST), traditionally underpinned by a cognitive-behavioral philosophy to practice (Bond, 2002). Despite this, several applied sport psychologists have recently detailed how their philosophy of practice has evolved over the course of their own development, typically adopting a more person-centered, solution-focused and “brief” therapy approach (Bond, 2002; Lindsay et al., 2007; Ravizza, 2002). This evolution of practitioners’ philosophy of practice, chosen methods, and the “brief” nature of metaphor-based approaches, may permit metaphorical exploration to be used as a therapy in its own right, or to be used to compliment more traditional PST methods in applied settings.

Despite support for exploration of metaphorical language, and its apparent valid application within professional practice settings, systematic research relating to client generated metaphor within applied sport psychology remains scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to provide a composite framework to facilitate the exploration of client generated metaphor within applied sport psychology settings. This purpose was supplemented with the aims of heightening awareness regarding the use of metaphorical language within sport psychology contexts; and describing how a five stage framework for exploring and transforming client generated metaphors can be applied within applied sport psychology settings. To this end, the present paper provides three case examples of utilizing client generated metaphors within a series of one-to-one applied consultations. The metaphorical framework underpinning this work was based upon the following composite approach modified from Kopp (1995), Lawley and Tompkins (2000) and Sims (2003) structured frameworks for exploring and transforming client generated metaphors.

A Framework for Exploring and Transforming Client Generated Metaphors

The steps of the frameworks provided by Kopp (1995), Lawley and Tompkins (2000) and Sims (2003) share several key similarities, and provide practitioners with a sequential protocol for exploring and transforming client’s metaphors.
The forthcoming detail draws together several of these similarities to propose a framework to explore client generated metaphors within applied sport psychology.

**Step 1—Identify the Client’s use of a Metaphor**

Identifying a client’s use of a metaphor is a necessary prerequisite to working when using this approach (Sims, 2003). Sims (2003) stated that to effectively identify the use of a metaphor the practitioner should strive to suspend the activity of attempting to “make sense” of the metaphor, and instead attempt to enter into the metaphor’s language of images. The advice offered at this stage instructed practitioners to look at the metaphor rather than attempt to look through it. Should a client not offer a metaphorical description of their situation, the practitioner may stimulate the client to describe their situation metaphorically by asking question such as “What images come to mind when you think about this?” or “What is this situation like?” Once the practitioner has effectively identified metaphor used by the client, and confirmed that the metaphor relates to an issue which the client is seeking to resolve to achieve their desired outcomes, the practitioner should guide the client’s exploration of the experience with the following steps.

**Step 2—Initial Exploration of the Metaphor**

Once the client’s metaphor has been identified, the practitioner may begin the process of exploring the metaphorical landscape using phrases such as “When you say [the metaphor] what image/picture comes to mind?”, or “What does the [metaphor] look like?” Kopp (1995) stated that, the client’s words and language should be used when inviting the client to create a mental image of the metaphor. This approach ensures the clients representation of the metaphor can emerge as it is the client’s imagery that is central to the process and not that of the practitioner.

**Step 3—Expand and Develop the Metaphorical Landscape**

Following the initial exploration of the metaphor, the practitioner should continue working with the client to further expand and develop the metaphorical landscape. The metaphor can be explored along the dimensions of (i) content (e.g., “What do you see/hear/feel”); “What happens before/during/after”); ii) relationships between symbols (e.g., “How are these aspects related to each other?”), and (iii) setting/context (e.g., “What else do you see”; Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). It is worth noting that while metaphors are often visual in nature, practitioners should make allowance for clients who may use auditory or kinesthetic metaphors (Battino, 2002).

**Step 4—Transformation of the Metaphor**

With the metaphorical landscape now contextualized, the practitioner invites the client to transform the metaphor by (i) encouraging the client to change the metaphoric image (e.g., “If you could change the image in any way, how would you change it?”), or (ii) inviting the client to consider a change suggested by the practitioner (e.g., “What if the [part of the metaphor to be changed] were a [the suggested change]?”; Kopp, 1995). This transformation is requested to change the metaphoric meaning of the image the athlete has described (Kopp, 1995). Specifically,
the metaphor represents the meaning the situation has for the client; therefore, transforming the image should change the meaning of the situation. The practitioner assists this change to help the client to make sense of their experiences and thus facilitate the client’s journey toward desired personal and performance outcomes.

**Step 5—Bringing the Metaphor Back to Reality**

This stage is only contained within Kopp’s (1995) approach and involves “bridging back” the client’s original situation (e.g., “How might the way you changed the image apply to your current situation?”) to identify specific behavioral or attitudinal changes. A lack of consensus exists regarding whether this generation of a new verbal understanding of the metaphor, or behaviors to be implemented is actually required. In addition, the rigidity of the above step-by-step procedure is not always necessary, and once adept, practitioners may begin to “dance on the moving carpet” and move between the steps in a nonlinear fashion (Kopp, 1995).

**Case Examples**

The following examples of exploring and transforming client generated metaphors are drawn from the first and third author’s consultancy experiences while working within a university consultancy environment. Extracts from these case studies are presented to contextualize the use of metaphorical landscapes within sport psychology consultations. Furthermore, consultant reflections on these events are provided to help explore their decisions and management of the consultation process and more specifically their personal and professional experiences when using metaphor therapies within their work (cf. Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004; Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Nevill, 2001). This form of reflection can provide a rich source of information for the practitioner themselves, and also for other practitioners in the field (Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004).

**Orienteer A—Calming the Surface**

At the time of this consultation, the first author (Consultant 1) was a male 28 year old applied sport psychologist working within a British academic institution acting as a consultant to various professional and amateur athletes. He was a Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society and an Accredited Sport Psychologist with the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) and had been actively training and practicing in Sport Psychology for six years.

Before these sessions, Consultant 1 had previously worked with Client A (a 27 year old male Orienteer who has competed at an elite level for 9 years and was on the verge of competing for his national team) across three separate sessions. The consultation described took place in the formal setting of a university consultancy room and lasted approximately 15–20 min.

Client A’s primary outcome goal for the season was to establish his place within the national team to allow him to compete at the forthcoming World Championships. At the time of the consultation, the practitioner and client had worked together for the previous 3 months and had primarily been working upon ensuring that the client was able to be in the correct “competition mindset” at the starting
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line of races. For example, within previous sessions the areas explored had been around pre-performance routines and arousal control strategies. As we discussed this aspect of his performance with respect to a forthcoming race, I noticed client A’s use of metaphor:

A. When I’m at the starting line if I’m not in the right frame of mind, this sounds strange, the surface of the water is just really choppy. Does that make sense?

SP. When you say ‘the surface of the water’ what image comes to mind? [Initial Exploration of the Metaphor]

A. It’s a lake, I’m stood at the side looking over the lake and noticing how choppy the waves look, there’s quite a lot of white water out there.

SP. Is there anything else that you notice?

A. The water just seems to be all over the place, waves crashing into one another and there’s quite a breeze out there too.

SP. What else do you see? How is the breeze related to the surface of the water? [Expanding and Developing the Metaphorical Landscape]

A. The breeze picks up, then it dies down, it seems to change direction quite a lot too. The gusts cause the waves to get higher and crash into one another.

SP. Okay, from your description, the image seems quite vivid. If you could change anything about the image, what might you change? [Inviting Transformation of the Metaphor]

A. I’d have the wind die down. Just let the surface calm down and become still.

SP. Can you see that happen? (At this point, A closed his eyes, became very still, his breathing getting slower and deeper).

A. Yeah, I can see it getting calmer (speaking slowly, rapport seemingly very strong at this point). I can see it becoming completely still, like a duck pond.

SP. And as it becomes completely still, like a duck pond (pacing A’s rate of speech), what happens?

A. Once it’s completely still, something heavy seems to drop into the middle, but there’s no splash, almost like something pulsed under the water. It causes a big circular ripple . . . the ripple travels outwards on the lake’s surface. Then another one . . . uniform ripples, spreading out equally . . . like a constant rhythm.

SP. That’s great . . . tell me more about the ripples.

A. They’re just happening at the right rhythm . . . uniform and controlled . . . ordered. There’s no splash, just the ripple moving outwards. Everything is as it should be . . . as it needs to be.

SP. How do you feel right now?

A. Yeah, good. I feel like I know how to control the waves more than I did . . . like I’m more able to get the surface of the water to be as it needs to be.
The session ended minutes later and A left the room looking much more at ease with the forthcoming race. Reflecting on the session, Consultant speculated that the calming of the waves and the uniform ripples my have been linked to some form of centering, the reduction of inner dialogue or self-talk, or a progression toward automaticity. While it would have satisfied my own curiosity, I didn’t feel it was necessary to explore this with A, and “bridge the gap”.

Speaking to A after the subsequent race, A reported that he felt that he was able to control his prerace mindset much more effectively following the session:

It strange . . . even just thinking about the image of the surface of the water lets me control my emotions much more during the period immediately before the race. I don’t know why, but it just seems to make sense to me and fits with how I imagine my mind working.

In addition, in subsequent sessions with A, the common language of the metaphor of the lake’s surface was used which I believed further strengthened the empathy, rapport and trust, and therefore effectiveness of the client-practitioner relationship.

Swimmer B—Inside a Bubble

The following case example is drawn from the third author’s consultancy experiences working within a university consultancy environment. Before these sessions, Consultant 2 had not worked with the client; however, client B had been exposed to applied sport psychology through previous work with applied practitioners. Consultant 2 was a female 24 year old trainee sport psychologist in her second year of supervised experience for BASES Accreditation and was based at the same academic institution as the first author. At the time of the consultancy, she had been actively training and practicing in Sport Psychology for two years. As required within the BASES supervised experience process, the third author was directly supervised and observed throughout her applied work by her accredited BASES supervisor. This consultation took place in the client’s training environment, and was approximately 15–20 min in duration.

Client B was female 19 year old national swimmer who has been competing from a young age, achieved great success as a junior (including becoming number one in her national age group), and traveled many parts of the world to train and compete. Despite these achievements, B had been experiencing a recent decline in confidence and felt relatively down and under pressure. The swimmer was approaching several major competitions, including the British Championships, and during our first consultation had begun to express a slight sense of apprehension and claustrophobia. Interestingly, B chose to express her feelings through the use of a commonly used metaphor:

B. Thing’s seem different compared with last year; I feel under much more pressure, I’m just trapped inside a bubble.

SP. That’s quite a strong image; tell me a bit more about this bubble that you feel trapped in [Initial Exploration of the Metaphor].

B. I feel as though I’m sat on a small chair and this bubble is all around me, it feels as though the surface of the bubble is pressing down on me (At this point, B uses her hands to show how close the bubbles surface is to
herself—this visual display of her metaphor creates a valuable tool for exploring her perceptions further). I just want to be able to press fast forward and be out of there for a while.

SP. So you feel as though you’ve been inside this bubble for a while?
B. Just recently I have yes.

SP. You also mention that the surface of the bubble is pressing down on you? (At this point I mirrored the swimmers visual dimension of the bubble with my own hands, aiming to enhance rapport further). Does this pressure come and go, or does it tend to stay there?
B. At the moment I feel like it’s constantly there, I feel like there are so many different things on my mind that this bubble is always around me. It never used to be.

SP. If it’s ok with you I’d just like to explore this bubble image slightly further, it seems as though you can really relate to it at the moment? (B willingly nods her head). Tell me a little about the actual bubble, its composition? Can you see straight through it? [Expanding and Developing the Metaphorical Landscape].
B. (Again, as B describes her bubble, her hand movements and body language further animate the metaphor showing how closely she can relate to the image). I feel as though the surface is quite thick, as though it would take quite a lot of effort to burst it. It’s completely see through though, which I think makes things worse, its like everyone can see me and is thinking things about me while I’m in there.

Before inviting B to transform her metaphor, it seemed important for us to “bridge back” and place her current metaphor into some form of context (i.e., to consider some of the factors causing her perceived pressure and subsequent feelings of enclosure and slight vulnerability). Essentially, if B was to envisage her bubble changing, she would firstly need to fully understand the factors giving the bubble its current form and the impact of it’s perception on the swimmer:

SP. You mentioned that there are lots of things on your mind at the moment causing you to remain inside this bubble and feel under a form of pressure?
B. Yes, I would say that over the last year more and more things have just built up. I think this year I feel under a lot of pressure to be a certain rank and to be accepted by British Swimming. I’m constantly thinking about having to swim a certain qualifying time to get onto a training camp or worrying about what others are thinking. I don’t feel as confident as I used to either, it’s kind of like I’ve lost my sparkle.

SP. There seems to be quite a few things causing this pressure? Is that why you think it would take quite a lot to burst this bubble?
B. I think so yes, I’ve noticed recently that I’ve lost some belief in my own expectations as a swimmer, I never used to worry about things as a junior, I guess I’m not that sure about how I’m going to get rid of these pressures.

SP. Going back again, I thought it was interesting that you described yourself sitting inside your bubble on a chair; can you think of why that could be?
B. Erm . . . , I think it’s because I feel like I might be there for a while! (At this point B laughed—I felt that this comment gave a brief insight into her positive and intelligent personality, and also highlighted how our brief exploration into her metaphor had begun to strengthen our working alliance).

SP. If next time we meet your bubble could have changed slightly, essentially for the better, what would have happened to it? [Inviting Transformation of the Metaphor]

B. It would definitely have moved further out (Again, B uses her hands to demonstrate her bubble expanding and at the same time sits more upright in her chair—suggesting that ‘change’ for her would equal ‘less pressure’). I would also like it to have become thinner.

SP. Just for a minute try and imagine yourself in that new bubble (B closes her eyes). How do you feel? Is it a different feeling to being inside the bubble you described at the start of the session?

B. Definitely, I feel more relaxed, things seem a lot lighter too, its almost like some day light has been let in, there’s a lot less pressure there too.

SP. Brilliant, how does that make you feel?

B. Much happier, I don’t feel as worried. It’s more like the way I used to feel.

Consultant 2 felt that this was an appropriate point to end the first session. The swimmer had not only been able to vividly image her transformed metaphor, she had also begun to remember how she used to feel as a swimmer (i.e., before feeling under this pressure). To close the session, I wanted to point out to her (particularly as she seemed to doubt any return to her previous form), that the ease she had had imaging her previous self could in fact suggest that she was more in control of these new pressures than she anticipated.

During subsequent sessions, B’s bubble metaphor continued to prove a valuable point of reference which aided in building rapport and empathy, along with demonstrating an understanding of B’s situation:

I think I’ve always thought of pressure as a bubble, when it gets too much I can literally feel the surface pressing on me. By helping me to change this and just give me a bit of room to maneuver has been really useful – I also now know that the bubble is mine, it’s just me that has a bubble like this!

For example, we were able to recall the bubbles significant transparency to discuss her perceived exposure toward others. By our third session, B had already begun to set specific goals to target the factors causing her to feel under pressure and reported that her bubble was starting to move outwards and even become thinner (i.e., therefore becoming more likely to eventually burst).

**Athlete C—Opening a Can of Worms**

The final case example is again drawn from the third author’s consultancy experiences working within a university as an applied consultant. While this was the first session with Client C, the client had previously been exposed to applied sport psychology through previous work with other applied practitioners. Consultant 2
was a female 24 year old trainee sport psychologist in her second year of supervised experience for BASES accreditation and was based at the same academic institution as the first author. At the time of the consultancy, she had been actively training and practicing in Sport Psychology for two years. As required within the BASES supervised experience process, the third author was directly supervised and observed throughout her applied work by her Accredited BASES supervisor. This session took place within a university consultancy room, and lasted approximately 20 min.

Athlete C was 18 year old female track athlete (100m hurdles), that has spent six years competing at a national level in her sport, challenging for a place in the international team. Recently, she had made a transition in her life outside of the sporting arena (starting University), which had caused her to take a step back and consider where her future on the track was now heading. After a recent string of injuries, C was also contemplating whether a future on the track was even possible. During our first session together, C described her anticipated return to full time training using a well known metaphor:

C. I’ve been away from full time training for four months now and I think that if I was to go back now I’d be opening up a big can of worms. I think I’m actually quite scared about going back which is why I’ve not yet done it.

SP. Ok, you mention that you would be opening up a big can of worms? What sort of image does this have for you? [Initial Exploration of the Metaphor]
C. I feel that while I’m away from the track everything is under control; all the worms are quiet and kept under the lid, at the moment the can of worms is not even being picked up, I guess that’s me trying not to think about things.

SP. So at the moment things feel in control? How many worms do you image being inside the can?
C. (At this point, C took a significantly deeper breath and an extended breath out). I think if I really thought about it there are quite a lot. In fact I’d say that the can was pretty full.

SP. And how big does this can of worms seem to you?
C. It’s like a normal sized can, the can itself isn’t that big, and I know it’s the number of worms inside it that would be the problem.

SP. Ok, it sounds like you can picture this image pretty well. If we were to have this can of worms in front of us (At this point I made a pretend reference to a can on the table in front of us), what would it be like? [Expanding and Developing the Metaphorical Landscape]
C. (C looked directly in the direction of the pretend can of worms). I think for the first time you would be able to see some movement. Almost like the lid of the can was ready to explode.

SP. Right, you say explode as opposed to open? Tell me a bit about that?
C. I think I’ve been bottling my feelings up for so long now that opening the can would be something I would not be able to control.

SP. Ok, if for a minute we just consider the worms inside the can, what do these represent to you? [Bringing the Metaphor Back to Reality]
C. I think each worm represents a worry I have about returning. For the past four months I’ve been avoiding thinking about the consequences of making a decision, either to return to competition or to otherwise consider my alternatives. I guess the worms represent worries such as; will I end up feeling stressed again, am I just setting myself up for disappointment, have I let my coach down, what are my parent’s expecting. I’m not sure I’m ready for all that.

SP. It sounds as though you would have a lot of questions and concerns to address if the lid of this can was to open?

C. Definitely, I know I need to do it though to move on one way or the other, I think I’ve just found myself on safe ground while I’m putting off my decision making.

SP. Well after six years of intense training and competition I don’t think you should feel disheartened about taking this time out. If you were able to change your current image of your can of worms, how would you choose to do this? [Transformation of the Metaphor]

C. (C took another deep breath and took a few moments to contemplate her response). I would be able to take the lid off calmly and let just one worm out at a time. I would be able to stop them all bursting out at once and becoming uncontrollable.

SP. That’s great, and how would that make you feel?

C. I would feel much less anxious; I think I would feel more capable of being able to handle the situation.

This session was ended with C feeling more comfortable about her current situation and more optimistic toward making some decisions’ about her future in our previous sessions together:

Talking about the worms made a lot of sense to me—I can clearly see the image of the can, and how I’d need to open it very gently in order to let one out at a time. Whilst I’ll need to be careful, I feel confident that I can manage this.

When using the client’s metaphor within this session, it was apparent that rapport was strong, with the client appearing at ease in discussing this sensitive issue. During the following session, we transformed her metaphor further to address a) what the first worm out of the can would represent, and b) how she would be able to control this situation. In keeping with this metaphorical approach, C soon found herself making big decisions about her future, putting past experiences behind her, and becoming comfortable establishing a slightly new identity.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the present paper was to provide a composite framework to facilitate the exploration of client generated metaphors within applied sport psychology settings. This was supplemented with the aim of providing a heightened awareness regarding the use of metaphorical language within sport psychology contexts for those reading the paper. These aims were achieved by describing several interven-
tions utilizing client generated metaphors and to raise awareness of this approach to therapeutic change within applied settings. In addition to this primary aim, the paper attempted to provide a specific framework which practitioners could use to begin exploring client generated metaphors in applied settings.

Reflecting upon the sessions, clients involved in each of the case examples stated their belief that while exploring the metaphorical landscape, they felt that the practitioner understood their “map”. This understanding may be due to practitioners remaining within the client’s metaphorical landscape, and at no point introducing their own interpretations of the content. The clients also commented that they perceived that the process of building the relationship with the sport psychologist was easier than their previous experiences of working with applied practitioners.

It is worth noting that when used in therapeutic settings metaphors can also be practitioner rather than client generated. The use of anecdotes and stories within some forms of psychoanalytical and Ericksonian therapies are examples of such incidences (e.g., Parker & Wampler, 2006). However, in the frameworks adopted by Kopp (1995), Lawley and Tompkins (2000) and Sims (2003), the practitioner’s role is primarily to aid the client in the exploration and transformation of their own (e.g., “client generated”) metaphor.

When working with “client generated” metaphors it is essential that the practitioner avoids adopting an “I’ll fix it” philosophy of practice commonly associated with PST (Ravizza, 2002). Metaphorical models advocate exploration of the athlete’s discourse, and a showing of respect, understanding, and empathy to the content and salience of their language (Kopp, 1995). This mindset is of particular note to the novice sport psychologist who may, through no fault of their own, consider themselves as technical problem solvers who may be tempted to rush into “fixing” problems in account of the dominant paradigms within their professional training (Holt & Strean, 2001; Ravizza, 2002).

Metaphorical language dominates sport psychology, with practitioners and clients regularly using metaphors from the other sciences, such as physics (e.g., terms such as “pressure”, “focus”, “toughness”, “resonance”, “momentum” and “flow”) and chemistry (e.g., terms such as “cohesion”). With this prevalence of metaphors within the language of sport psychology, there would appear to be a significant opportunity for practitioners to use these symbolic representations, although there is a lack of literature focusing specifically upon using such an approach within applied settings.

**Implications for Professional Practice**

The authors propose that there are various practitioner implications that emerge from this paper and the notion of exploring client generated metaphors. First, practitioners should become more aware of their own and their client’s common usage of metaphorical language within consultation settings. The case studies presented in this paper, and more specifically the reflections of those events, illustrate the powerful impact of using this approach with regard to fostering practitioner client empathy and rapport and a gaining of access to the client’s world (cf. Sims, 2003; Ottati et al., 1999). Metaphorical descriptions often convey abstractions that are implicit within a culture (Poolton, Masters, & Maxwell, 2007), and so working with client generated metaphors may assist in overcoming potential cultural barriers between
practitioners and clients while building rapport. Further, an increased awareness of metaphor use in a clients’ language may provide practitioners with additional options with regards to brief contact interventions in applied settings via adopting a framework such as the one detailed within the present article.

The second implication of the paper is that practitioners should be mindful that it is not essential to “make sense” of the client’s metaphor. In line with other authors, we agree that it is paramount for the client to understand their metaphor and be able to clearly verbalize the symbolism of their situation (Kopp, 1995; Lawley & Tompkins, 2000; Sims, 2003). The practitioner’s role here is not to interpret the metaphor, merely act in a facilitative capacity to empower the athlete through increased awareness, exploration and understanding of the situations and images they describe. We suggest the framework presented in this paper provides a map for the practitioner to adopt such a role.

The third implication derived from the use of metaphorical language relates to the potential impact of this exploration within the more “traditional” intervention strategies associated with PST. To this point, we have presented this framework for exploring client generated metaphor as an approach positioned more closely with person-centered, solution-focused and brief therapies rather than within the PST domain. However, the prevalence of metaphor within everyday language creates the position where its use is inherent within several fundamental psychological skills. Indeed, as highlighted in the case examples for client A and client B, the exploration of metaphors impacted on the potential future application of PST. For example, for client A, the exploration of metaphor appeared to have a direct application to the clients use of internal dialogue (self-talk) and/or a centering approach linked to the ‘quieting of the water’ they sought to attain. In comparison, for client B, the exploration of metaphorical language and the desire to ‘burst the bubble’ directly affected the future goal setting practices undertaken by the athlete. The authors propose that this application to PST should not be limited to these skills. For example, applied relaxation programs commonly integrate phrases and cue words that are used as triggers to help invoke a relaxed state (Williams & Harris, 2006; Hanton, Thomas, & Mellalieu, 2009). Typically, these words and phrases are provided to help represent an environment conducive to a relaxed state; i.e., an implicit metaphorical landscape. This position continues in the application of autogenic training and activation increasing techniques such as energizing verbal cues (cf. Williams & Harris, 2006). However, prevalence and consideration of metaphor is perhaps most pertinent within the use of mental imagery. Specifically, the content of imagery scripts often incorporates reference to metaphorical language and landscapes to help induce a rich vivid experience for the athlete. This imagery is central to the use of metaphor and as they are client-generated they are already present within the client’s imagery experience. Therefore, we are not asking clients to attempt a new skill, but instead “pacing” their subjective experience and allowing them to immerse themselves in their own imagery. While some athletes may not have sufficient imagery skills to permit the use of a metaphor based approach, the framework outlined specifically relates to working within client-generated metaphor, thus when a client uses a metaphorical description they are implicitly demonstrating a sufficient imagery skill base. Although further research is required, conscious exploration of these metaphors during script development has the potential to increase the impact of mental imagery due to the increased awareness and
understanding athletes experience when undertaking such discussion. To use metaphorical descriptions alongside other more mainstream methods (e.g., PST), it may be appropriate to include specific training relating to client-generated metaphors within the training of applied practitioners. It is therefore hoped that those individuals responsible for the training, development, and assessment of practitioners in our field might consider including frameworks such as that outlined within the present paper into training pathways.

In conclusion, we concur with Hanin and Stambulova’s (2002) contention that metaphors are indeed “maps” of a client’s thinking and self-knowledge, which can be explored via the therapeutic alliance of client and skilled practitioner. We hope this article will bring attention to the process of exploring and transforming client generated metaphors, and highlight to the readership the potential of this approach within applied settings. Finally, it is hoped that this article can serve to encourage applied practitioners to delve into their “toolbox” of techniques, further explore the characteristics of the toolbox and its contents, and consider how they might transform the tools to further “strengthen” the alliance between client and practitioner.

References


