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The Price of Admission: Football Players' Sacrificial Conceptions of

Career and Health through Metaphors of War, Religion, and Family

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The Price of Admission: Football Players' Sacrificial Conceptions of Career and Health through Metaphors of War, Religion, and Family

by

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To Mom, Dad, Cameron, and Obi, for always giving me a reason to be homesick.

To Swarna and Mo, for being my best friends and rock for over a decade.

To my Halsteddy Bears, for filling the past two years with more laughter, fun, and joy than I could have ever imagined. Swerve.

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With the recent discovery of traumatic brain injuries developing in retired professional football players, this study seeks to explore players' perceptions of their careers in the sport, and how this may reflect notions of personal health over the long-term. Current and former football players, athletic staff, and other members of the football community were interviewed with the goal of learning about the full trajectory of a football career. Using grounded metaphorical analysis to examine the interview data, our study found the use of metaphor by participants to be integral in players' descriptions of their careers. Participants likened aspects of their careers to enduring a war, having a religious experience, and being part of a family unit. Long-term, post-career health implications are discussed in relation to players' conceiving of their experiences through these metaphors, along with limitations of the study and directions for future research.

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Introduction

Traditionally familiar football injuries - torn ACL's, fractured bones, and concussions, are not the only health-damaging aspects of the sport that an athlete must reflect on when weighing the risks of a long-term career as a football player (Saal, 1991). With medical research in recent years examining the brains of several former professional football players, severe brain damage and cognitive decline is now added to the list of health concerns of which a player must be wary (DeKosky et al., 2010). Previously overlooked aspects of the intense physicality of the sport, such as repeated head trauma, were first brought to light in an autopsy examination of retired NFL player Mike Webster, who died at the young age of 50. The autopsy revealed groundbreaking information regarding the toll of football-related head injuries on neurological health, determining Webster to have a degenerative brain disease known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE (Omalu et al., 2010). The condition was never previously known to exist in relation to football players, and caused many of the symptoms Webster suffered with throughout his short life, including severe depression, memory loss, and suicidal tendencies (Breslow, 2013). These initial studies drew awareness to the surprising findings, and other neuropathologists have gone on to contribute further knowledge of the prevalence of CTE in deceased professional football players. Ann McKee, a neuropathologist from Boston University, has since studied the brains of 46 ex-NFL players suspected to have the disease, based on their behavior (i.e. memory loss and suicidal thoughts) before their untimely deaths. CTE was found in 45 of the 46 cases studied (McKee et al., 2009). In addition to the scientific community, the football players

themselves have raised concerns over the risk of CTE, presenting a class action lawsuit of over 2,500 former athletes against the National Football League and helmet manufacturer Riddell, Inc (Goldberg, 2013). The former players, some suffering from CTE symptoms such as dementia and depression, claimed that the NFL had knowingly "concealed the dangers of concussions and rushing injured players back onto the field, while glorifying and profiting from the kind of bone-jarring hits that make for spectacular highlight-reel footage" (Associated Press, 2013). The plaintiffs were awarded a collective total of $756 million dollars in damages (Associated Press, 2013).

With increased attention and awareness concerning the long-term health of professional football players, the reactions of current athletes have varied. In response to the airing of a controversial documentary about CTE and its particular occurrence in former football players, entitled "League of Denial" on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), several current players had mixed reactions to the topic of the serious health risks and consequences associated with the sport. Ed Reed, currently playing for the New York Jets, described the business of professional football as "shady":

> "The business of football is very shady. The fact that they would withhold information is bad. The fact that our [collective bargaining agreement] would not want that information, the fact that our older players would take money instead of getting that information is bad. The business of football, NFL football, is shady. Now we can't get that information anymore? It's just swept under the rug? That's bad." (Breslow (2), 2013)

While some comments were discouraging of the practices used by the NFL, others seemed to support the idea that players are aware of the health risks associated with playing football at a professional level, including a comment from Aaron Rodgers, current quarterback for the Green Bay Packers, in response to being asked if he will watch the documentary:

> "I will not be watching, Tuesday night is a night of film. So I'll be busy. But … I know the risk that I take when I step on the field. I'm risking future health and future mental health. I understand that, future physical health." (Breslow (2), 2013)

Although recent discoveries of serious long-term consequences to neurological health have motivated some professional athletes to reconsider their goals in the sport, the idea of sacrificing future health and wellness for a successful career is not a new phenomenon in football. Friends and colleagues of Mike Webster recall him stating in the prime of his career that he wanted to go to "war" out on the field, and may only live until 40 or 50 years old as a result of the toll this would take on his body, even without the knowledge of possibly acquiring CTE later in life (Michael, 2013). Webster's colleagues described the sacrifice of health as the price of admission for success in football (Michael, 2013). Current professional athletes are continuing this precedent, even with the devastating news of possible permanent brain damage. In a series of interviews conducted by the Associated Press in 2011 concerning head injuries, 23 of 44 NFL players interviewed admitted they would "try to conceal a possible concussion rather than

pull themselves out of a game" (ESPN, 2011), and some claimed to have already done so (ESPN, 2011). In a more comprehensive survey conducted in 2009, 30 of 160 NFL players participating in the study also admitted to concealing or downplaying the effects of a concussion (Associated Press, 2009). Pittsburgh Steelers cornerback Deshea Townsend described the hiding of injuries as simply "part of the game" (AP, 2009), even though it is often times apparent to other players when a teammate has a head injury. "Everyone can clearly see that you have a concussion. You are walking around like you are drunk," said Seattle Seahawks defensive back Roy Lewis (AP, 2009).

With such diverse reactions to the idea of preserving long-term health in the professional football community and organization, this study seeks to learn about the role of safety and health for players in considering their career paths as professional athletes. What are some of the ways in which players conceptualize their experiences with football, and how may these depictions have an impact on their notions of personal health over the span of their professional time in the sport, and beyond? In exploring these questions, our study utilized a grounded theoretical approach to these issues with the use of interview data from players themselves and members of the football community, asking each of them a set of questions with the goal of covering a wide range of aspects about the trajectory of the football career. The role of metaphor in interviewees' discussions of the football experience became an integral part of the descriptions of the sport, with players likening different aspects of the game and their careers to enduring a war, having a religious experience, and being part of a family unit. With the emergence of these metaphors in our data, the discussion of a life in football was better understood

and analyzed with regard to health and safety consequences for players, and therefore

became the primary theoretical underpinning of the study.

Metaphor and Organization

Organizational research has long focused on the use of metaphor by organizational members in recounting their professional experiences (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Interest in the subject has progressively increased in the field, with a growing body of work examining the importance of language and discourse in organizational communication, and the advancement of more engaging and complex methods of metaphorical analysis across several other social science disciplines over the last decade (Cornelissen et al., 2008). The term "metaphor" has traditionally referred to a figure of speech asserting an identity relation between seemingly unlike concepts (e.g., my job is a prison). However, the linguist George Lakoff and his colleagues have argued that metaphors in language reflect "conceptual metaphors" in human thought that derive from cognitive correspondences between abstract concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Turnage, 2013). According to this view, speakers invoke conceptual metaphors to communicate their own personal meanings by relating their internalizations to something commonly understood or familiar to the audience receiving the message. Organizational scholars have emphasized the poetic quality of metaphorical language and its origins in the most elemental aspects of language (Langer, 1942; Hogler et. al, 2008). Metaphor has a way of driving creativity, "leading to a communal recognition of the 'way things are' in the world" (Hogler et al., 2008, p. 394).

Although metaphors are appreciated for their power and use related to rhetorical strategy in organizations, there is some debate concerning a common understanding of how metaphors work in the organizational context (Oswick & Jones, 2006). One view

posits metaphor to be the figurative "distraction from literal meaning," or in metaphorical terms, the icing of organization rather than the cake (Hogler et al., 2008, p. 393). In this perspective, metaphor exists as a decorative addition to communicating meaning of experience and is not a core part of expressing these experiences. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003) propose a different view, arguing that metaphor can serve as the basis of our thought processes. Metaphor is "the cake," in that it can essentially regulate how we think about our lives and "our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane detail" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). Metaphors are similar to our basic senses, in that just like sight or touch, they can serve as some of the only ways we can comprehend the world around us (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003).

Hogler and colleagues (2008) further emphasize the necessity of metaphor in organizational sensemaking, describing language as "the glue holding together organization, with metaphor and aesthetic knowledge as its foundation" (p. 407). Their perspective is similar to that of Lakoff and Johnson, in that metaphor is still situated at the heart of organizational reality, but offers a more aesthetic, rather than cognitive, way of embodying the sensory imagery that makes metaphor such a powerful way of understanding experience. Hogler and colleagues stress how metaphors are viewed as "conceptual, analytical, or discursive tools," and "do not necessarily speak to human experience and emotions" (p. 406). An aesthetic understanding of metaphor allows for this more emotional connection to organizational reality, as it is a more artistic approach to understanding metaphor, including increased attention to sensory experience, physical perception, and a less processed experience of emotion (Strati 1999; Hogler et al. 2008).

Organizational members, and all humans for that matter, are natural artists, capable of turning any idea into a work of art (Langer, 1967). We are experts of feeling and emotion, through creating our own images of our experiences (Langer, 1967; Hogler et al., 2008). An aesthetic vantage point appeals to these artistic sensibilities of metaphor, and takes the understanding of the role of metaphor one step further, allowing us to "make sense of our everyday experience, to figure out who we are, and to deal with the emotion of organizations" (Hogler et al., 2008, p. 406).

Another contested issue concerns the view of metaphors being "elicited" or "projected" onto an organizational reality (Cornelissen et al., 2008). Researchers have examined the conceptualization of metaphor as either deductively or inductively derived, in that deductively derived metaphors are forced or imposed upon the studying of organizational situations as a way to understand them, whereas inductive metaphors naturally arise in the descriptions of experience by organizational members and can therefore be elicited or readily extracted by organizational researchers (Grant & Oswick, 1996; Palmer & Dunford, 1996; Cornelissen et al., 2008). For example, researchers may project the metaphor of a "melting pot" to describe and analyze diversity within an organization, or the metaphor may be extracted from patterns in the accounts of organizational members regarding their experiences with diversity in the organization. The elicitation approach is particularly relevant to our study, in that it centers around actual language use of organizational members, and how metaphor is used to create meaning from the members themselves. Organizational studies have specifically examined how metaphors that are introduced into the language of members, whether

intentionally or not, can have influence over the sensemaking abilities and language use of receiving members (Sims & Gioia, 1986; Gioia et al., 1994). In the study of organizational change processes, Greenberg (1995) found that dividing employees into "blue" and "gray" groups in the midst of a company restructuring led to organizational members describing the change and the "blue" and "gray" terms in comparison to the American civil war. The unintentional civil war conception developed as a result of the introduction of the two groups to employees, and served as a symbolic way for members to make sense of the change happening in the organization. In a later study, Heracleous and Jacobs' (2008) examined the use of physical props in organizational development workshops, finding that elicited meanings emerged from the associations between available props and organizational dynamics, and provided access to some of the ways employees' regarded aspects of their workplace. For instance, the use of spatial elevation and centrality elicited metaphors of importance, and organizational relatedness metaphors arose from spatial proximity exercises, in a "recursive process of construction and interpretation" (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008, p. 69).

Finally, another feature of metaphor that makes it so essential to personal idea development is its ability to reach audiences on an overarching, highly relatable, macro-level way of thinking and understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Cornelissen et al. 2008). These personal perspectives are not only understood with the use of complementary broad language, but also the smaller details within a metaphor, as "the critic gains clues to the overarching metaphorical structure by paying close attention to specific language being used on the microlevel" (Turnage, 2013, p. 522). Lakoff and

Johnson contend that metaphor can initially reach its audience on a macro-level with the face-value statement, but can then be further internalized on a smaller, micro level (Lakoff & Johnson 2003; Cornelissen et al., 2008). For instance, a former NFL football player in our study compared the damages a colleague endured in relation to his health during his career to "going through a war." This statement can be broken down into smaller metaphorical expressions, such as "he was defeated," or "his body endured a battle" (Cornelissen et al., 2008). Not only do metaphors explain one overarching experience, but also a range of related conceptualizations within the same metaphor.

Our study adopts the perspective of Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003), Hogler and colleagues (2008), and Cornelissen and colleagues (2008), wherein metaphors are perceived as foundationally embedded in our communication processes, and vital to our comprehension of organizational systems. Through this lens, our research expands current knowledge about football players' perspectives on the entire trajectory of their careers by examining how these athletes describe their experiences with the sport—from how they grew up playing football, to what is going through their minds during game time, and where they see themselves and their careers in relation to football over the long-run. From a communicative perspective, we explore what metaphors are being used in the language of organizational members—that of former and current football players, and other active members of the football community—in order to learn and understand more about how these athletes view their experiences. Given the recent neurological discoveries related to the physicality of football and the dangers of traumatic brain injury that come along with the sport, it is important that we gather knowledge about how

athletes view themselves within the game and how this may relate to their own conceptions of health and safety as they participate in football as it is played now. Metaphor is one way to discover and understand how players are conceiving of their careers and relationship with football, as metaphor has the power to encapsulate the complex experience of an individual into a more universal, relatable message. The athletes are the artists in this case, using their sensory experiences to communicate organizational realities.

As we interviewed various players and members of the football organization, certain metaphorical themes arose in the language of participants. Several players described their experiences with war-like, hyper-masculine imagery, depicted their football talent as a God-given calling and religious experience, and compared the relationship with their team to that of a family unit. Here we discuss some of the theoretical background behind each of these themes surfacing in our study, and try to gain insight into their primacy in the language of football players and others heavily involved in the sport.

Football as War

Comparing various aspects of football to the intense experience of war has become a regular occurrence among sports media, leaders of the sport, and the players themselves (Bergh, 2011). Games are seen as a battle, and opposing teams are the enemy that must be defeated. In analyzing the telecast of Super Bowl XXV, McKay (1991) examined the use of war analogies during the game presentation, which happened to be

televised during the Gulf War conflict. He found the presentation to be both overtly and covertly linked to war-like imagery, with jet-aircrafts flying over a crowd singing the national anthem while waving their American flags, to footage of armed forces stationed in the Gulf during half time, and the singing of fight and war-related songs (McKay, 1991; Kellett, 2002). "It was as if 'Operation Desert Storm' was to be re-enacted on the football field that day" (Kellett, 2002, p. 61).

In his critical examination of the male body and its portrayal on *Monday Night Football*, Trujillo (1995) also found several comparisons of football to war. If sports are interpreted as war in the media, "the body is transformed into a weapon, into an instrument of violence and aggression" (p. 410). This type of militarism was portrayed on *Monday Night Football* with opening lines of "All out war, baby" (p. 411), and "put all the kiddies in bed, 'cause this means war" (p. 411). Players were also described by sportscasters as "weapons, missiles, shields, rockets, and hitting machines" (p. 411). The distinctions between war, masculinity, sport, and the media is becoming increasingly unclear, as athletes construct their identities around these connections. While these studies go into detail about media portrayals of football-as-war, our study seeks to learn about these metaphors as they are conveyed by the players in their actual language and discourse, in order to further understand how these metaphors relate to their personal careers.

The personal health costs of these linkages between sport, masculinity, and war can be dire for athletes. In *Power at Play*, Messner (1992) warns of the risks associated with conceptualizing of football with such hyper-masculine imagery, claiming that

winning in football "was premised on physical power, strength, discipline, and willing(ness) to take, ignore, or deaden pain" and "inclined men to experience their own bodies as machines, as instruments of power and domination - and to see other peoples' bodies as objects of their power and domination" (p. 515). In its current state, the success of a professional football player hinges on his ability and willingness to both incur and give out injury, and seeing oneself as part of an organization where members are at war with one another may have serious consequences on players' notions of long-term career health and safety.

Football as Calling

Another metaphorical theme that emerged in our data was football as religion or calling. Several players described their involvement in football as God-given, or bestowed upon them as a divine purpose and calling. In their recent work, Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2014) problematize the idea of career callings and how they have become such a powerful force in our current culture, calling into question whether "contemporary discursive practices really offer people choices in control over and resources for pursuing the singular callings presumably animating their lives" (p. 9). Although calling has potential as a constructive strength in people's lives, oftentimes it can be detrimental if taken to an extreme (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014). One pitfall of callings is that they are often deemed as necessary to one's life—not seen as a preferred way of being, but rather a compelling need "to respond to the internal or external 'summons' drawing them toward particular ends not of their own choosing" (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014, p. 9;

Conklin, 2012). This becomes a problem when the only way to achieve calling is through paid work and career, in that there is a greater chance of failing the mission when its fulfillment entirely depends on these notions and not other aspects of life, such as leisure activities and personal relationships (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Berg et al., 2010). Athletes who conceive their careers as callings may face these challenges when conceptualizing their work as divine purpose, failing to properly weigh the health risks of the sport in order to fulfill their God-given mission.

Another issue with career as a calling is the tendency for organizational leaders to take advantage of this moral obligation and assert power over employees (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014). Bunderson and Thompson (2009) found that zookeepers who viewed their work as a calling had a more difficult time voicing their opposition to organizational leaders as a result of feeling bound to the organization, because of the moral attachment they felt towards their work. In this sense, perceiving football as a God-given calling may inhibit players from speaking up regarding worries about personal long-term health, in that they feel connected to the football organization through their calling to play the game, and hesitant to challenge the institution housing this calling.

Football as Family

Thinking of team rapport as intensely as familial relationships can also carry unforeseen, destructive consequences for football players. In her examination of evolving corporate culture, Casey (1999) cautions scholars to be wary of "family" metaphors used by organizations to promote themselves and their workforce. At first glance, inclusive

metaphors may appear as a "welcome recognition of relational and affective dimensions of human life that 'ought' to be promoted in workplaces historically ridden with industrial conflicts and divisions" (Casey, 1999, p. 156). Organization-as-family metaphors are generally accepted without controversy, as they incite positive social dynamics in the minds of employees, who may first go to conceptions of a "happy family" when introduced to this metaphor within an organization (Casey, 1999).

Although these metaphors can promote some constructive effects, such as emotional commitments and bonds among organizational members, there is also a dark-side to these conceptions. In thinking of colleagues as family, one must sacrifice as a family member would for the organization, and as such, ambivalence and conflict about corporate practices are kept under control, internalized, and not communicated. "Overt displays of employee resistance and opposition are virtually eliminated" (p. 175) as these notions are "traded off against the benefits of relatedness and identification with corporate greatness" (Casey, 1999, p. 175). In the conception of organization as family, there is no "us versus them" concerning organizational hierarchy, and therefore less of an avenue to resist controlling, abusive corporate practices. Every member is part of a single, consolidated, and united family unit. In the context of football, these metaphors of organization-as-family are reinforced in the minds of players, and may contribute to the resistance of athletes in communicating problems with the organization, especially when these problems may interfere with the success of the team as a whole.

With a review of how metaphor is used to conceptualize organizational realities, we follow with an explanation of the grounded methodology used in the study, and how

metaphor analysis evolved as the most fitting way to interpret our interview data from various members of the football profession. The study then goes on to describe the metaphors used by interviewees to explain their experiences with different aspects of the profession. We then conclude with practical and theoretical implications, particularly regarding the personal health and safety of these athletes, and examine possible limitations and future research in this field.

Methodology

The data for this study come from a larger corpus of 88 in-depth interviews conducted over the course of two years by a faculty-led research team that included eight undergraduates, six graduate students, and a post-doctoral researcher. In order to capture the varied stages of a career in professional football, participants included aspiring NFL (i.e., now in the NCAA), current NFL, and former NFL players. Additionally, football professionals who were not players, but worked with players on a daily basis—and, consequently, could comment on the business of football—were also interviewed. For the purposes of this study, 23, or roughly 26% of the interviews were randomly selected for analysis.

Participants

We recruited participants using multiple strategies, and supported through a snowball sampling method. This included leads and introductions from members of the community to former NFL players (who often maintain a high profile, even after retirement) and to members of the athletic staff at various colleges. Additionally, several members of our team worked in professional football organizations that enabled them to request interviews from colleagues, as well as referrals to other players or professionals. Finally, many members of our team had various football players and professionals in their personal networks, and made direct requests as well as the request for referrals to other players.

Of our specific sample, eight participants were known aspiring NFL players and current NCAA football players. Four participants were former NFL players, and one person was a recently retired NCAA player. The study also included four current NFL coaches of various levels, and one current NCAA coach. Three other participants worked on the athletic staff of NCAA college teams, with two of these staff members involved in the academic side of their teams. All participants currently involved in NCAA college football either played or worked for Division 1 teams. At least 12 of the participants were known to be from the Southwestern region, while two others were from the Pacific Coast and the South. Five of the current NCAA college players and all four of the former NFL players grew up playing football from a young age, or before 14 years old.

Data Collection Procedures

Team members conducted the various interviews based upon detailed formal interview schedules for each type of participant. This included an interview schedule for current players and aspiring NFL players, former NFL players, and those in advisory roles on the athletic staff.   The current, aspiring NFL, and former player interview schedules were organized into four sections: player background, the timing of the game and season, communication issues, and life outside the game, while the athletic staff interview schedules included individual background, a day-to-day description of their jobs, and what they have experienced on the job. Some key prompts and questions from the player interview schedules included having a player describe their worst injury, what made them want to become a football player, and what they would like to do once they

stop playing football. Key questions to athletic staff involved describing the progression of the year for their particular jobs, and how they think the media has shaped player perceptions of the football institution. The length of the twenty-three interviews analyzed for this study ranged greatly from 20 to 100 minutes, totaling approximately 13 hours together.

The interviews were professionally transcribed and resulted in 221 single spaced typed pages. The present author reviewed the recording and occasionally corrected the transcriptions as needed.

Grounded Metaphorical Analysis

Our original purpose in interviewing members of the football community was to find clues regarding how athletes may conceive of their own long-term health in relation to the descriptions of their careers in the sport. In preliminary stages of analysis, this study sought out this information with certain theoretical underpinnings in mind related to organizational communication and dynamics. At first encounter with the interviews, we had the following research question:

Research Question: What can we learn about the long-term health of football players, as related to their organization?

In the first reading of the interview data, the analysis was more of a deductive process, wherein there were certain organizational theories in mind (i.e. socialization processes and identity theory) that we looked for examples of in the data, in the hopes of

shedding light on long-term health concerns through the vehicle of these theories. This process proved to be ineffective and a bit obscure, in that it did not focus on the actual language use of the participants and what emerged from the discourse naturally, but instead how certain parts of the data may fit neatly into some established organizational theory. With the ultimate goal of learning about the long-term health of players as related to their career experiences, we reexamined our method of analysis and sought an approach that would allow us to take the data at face value and pay attention to what concepts surfaced in a less artificial manner than our previous method. Throughout the readings of interview data, we noticed the use of metaphorical language quite often in descriptions, and therefore explored literature on a precedent of metaphorical analysis in organizational studies.

Our exploration lead to several legitimate uses of grounded metaphorical analysis in the organizational realm, most notably a study by Tracy et al. (2006) examining the metaphorical language used by employees experiencing bullying in the workplace. Similar to our study, the work did not set out to investigate metaphor and initially sought to shed light on bullying conflict through the use of short vignettes. The study also used interview data to explore these ideas, focusing on the smaller details of metaphorical pieces within employee language, after concluding metaphorical analysis was the most appropriate approach in making sense of their data. With these similarities, Tracy and colleagues (2006) became one of the main exemplars in our process of grounded metaphorical analysis within this work, and was well suited to our ultimate goal of

gaining insight into how players conceive of their careers and the implications this may have on their long-term health and well being.

In her 2013 book on the impact of grounded analysis in communication studies, Tracy contends an iterative approach to data analysis is one of the most insightful methods, wherein an iterative analysis "alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories" (p. 184). This blending of both worlds takes into account the precedented knowledge and theory base of the researcher, while also emphasizing the emergent data as the foundation of research (Tracy, 2013). This reflexive engagement with the data allows a researcher to refine their understanding of the material, and to use both their instincts and precedented theory in coming up with the most suitable and valid methodology (Tracy, 2013; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This iterative process very much defines the approach to our research. Once we re-examined the interview data in terms of what we saw emerge from the text and connected these thoughts to current literature and research on the topic of metaphor (i.e. Tracy et al., 2006), we began to truly see the grand scheme of the impact the interview data had, and our study was actively set in motion from this iterative approach.

In reviewing the literature on metaphorical language use in organizations, and discovering the way in which these metaphors help so many organizational members make sense of their everyday realities, we reactivated our research with a more vigorous way of learning about the experience of current and former athletes and others directly involved in the community. With this grounded analysis approach, we examined the data with a renewed guiding research question:

Revised Research Question: What types of metaphorical language do participants use to conceive of their experiences with football, and what may this suggest about notions of long-term personal health?

Our first step in analyzing the interview data for metaphorical language was to organize the metaphors we found in each participant's description. In Tracy et al. (2006), metaphorical data related to bullying *only* was separated from the rest of the metaphors used in interviews, as their focus was on the descriptions of this experience specifically. Because our study aspired to learn about all aspects of interviewees' experience with football and how these descriptions reflect attitudes toward personal health, we simply began our organization of the data by pulling all metaphorical language out of the interviews. In doing this, we were left with roughly 10.5 pages of metaphorical language use, or approximately 5% of the full interview text. We then began to look for any patterns or themes within the data, by first searching for multiple occurrences of specific metaphorical words, e.g., family, war, and religion (Cowan & Bochantin, 2011; Tracy et al., 2006). After finding these initial themes, we went on to read the data for metaphorical phrases that related to these groupings, such as interviewees conceptualizing ideas with war-related metaphors like battle, dominance, heroism, and empire. In the process of framing metaphorical language, we used a strategy of identifying the tenor and vehicle of each conceptualization, as modeled by Cowan and Bochantin (2011). Metaphors are comprised of two basic parts—the *tenor*, or original subject the speaker is trying to make sense of through metaphor (in our case, anything related to the football career), and the *vehicle*, or the way individuals express and compare the relationship of their metaphor with football (in our case, through war, religion, and family-related metaphors) (Cowan

and Bochantin, 2011). For instance, a battlefield may be the vehicle used to express the tenor of a football game as a war-like situation where one must "fight" on the field. Conceptualizing of metaphorical language in this connective, relationship-based method allowed us to understand the language in a more complex way, and find these related, sub-metaphors of each major theme, i.e. a "battle" or "fight" within the major category of "war." These more micro-level metaphorical language uses were then grouped with any of the larger thematic framework they were well suited with—including the three major conceptualizations of *war*, *religion/calling*, and *family*. Openly coding the metaphorical data in this approach allowed us to use more of a continuum in our building of metaphorical themes, wherein some metaphors were labeled as related and topically connected to each of the three frameworks, but were possibly less intensely related to the larger category than the direct comparisons and wording of war, religion and family, similar to the grouping of metaphors in the Tracy et al. (2006) study. Comparing oneself to a hero in the football game was seen as less related to the main category of war than imagery that compared dominance in the field to using actual war-like weaponry. In the following section we discuss the metaphors used by interviewees to conceive of their life experiences with football.

<center>**Metaphors of Football**</center>

War and Masculinity

By far, the most prevailing metaphorical theme we found in the interview data related to conceiving of football as war and a test of masculinity. Some participants were very direct in their war depictions, while others used more subtle, war-related terms, capturing the emotionality of their experience through this imagery. In the context of long-term health, a college football coach eluded to the metaphor of war in describing the toll the sport takes on a player's body and well-being:

> <u>Interviewer:</u> *What do you think about some of the recent concerns in the media regarding players' long term health?*
>
> <u>Interviewee:</u> *You know, actually, excuse me, I think that's getting better. I think that those issues have developed because, you know, treatments and like, you know, like how they deal with injury and things like that from the past have gotten so much better. And so a lot of the issues that the people older like, you know, guys like <former college football player>, he was one of the greatest players ever at UT, like on this. You know, he's the man for life, I mean, if you look at him now he looks like he's been in World War.*

The coach does believe the organization is getting better in terms of treating injuries and drawing awareness to long-term health issues, but describes the conditions of the past as war-like, using the metaphor of a former college player going through "World War" in reference to the injuries he acquired during his career. Here, the metaphor conveys the effects of the past as war, with the struggles of players in previous generations being war-like in their intensity and level of long-term sacrifice. The present,

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on the other hand, is seen as a progression to a more health-aware organization for current players in the league.

In terms of micro-level, war-related metaphorical language, two other participants—both current college football players—referred to various experiences in their football career as a "battle" and "fight:"

<u>Interviewer</u>: *Well then how has your personal relation—your career impacted your personal relationships?*

<u>Current College Player 1</u> *(Division 1): It made it better in some areas. Some areas it made it better, and in some areas it made it not better. Because you know the thing about it is some people envy, and I had friends who didn't make it. They asked the question, why he made it? I used to always have to battle it out with them. So I used to always tell myself, I shouldn't have to explain why I made it to my friend, and so I lost a couple of friends.*

In the subsequent text, the interviewer brings up the topic of athletes being wrapped up in their identities as football players, and how this affects them after leaving the sport:

<u>Current College Player 2 (Division 1):</u> *In summer going to graduate either in May or the summer depending when they go back to -- when the NFL cranks back up. But they recognized after three or four years that the NFL stands for Not For Long because they see, you know they get there, hey I was drafted in the second round by the Minnesota Vikings and I am the "Shizzle" and here I am, You play a little your first season, and hey that was fun and I am getting paid and what -- how come I read about this guy that plays my position that we are going to draft, and then recognized that each year, they got to fight for their livelihood. They have to fight for their job every day, because of the job of half of that franchise is for front offices to go find the guy who replaces you.*

In the first metaphor scenario, the player conceptualizes of the conflict and competition between he and his colleagues as a "battle," in that the competitive aspect of

the game causes animosity between players. The second metaphor uses the analogy of a "fight" in referencing the competition to maintain one's standing in the league every year. You must "fight" for your livelihood, and "fight" for your job, conceptualizing the "every man for himself" aspect of a sport that is known for its emphasis on working as a team during game time. One may initially expect war-like metaphors of "battle" and "fight" to be associated with the dynamics of an actual football game, but this imagery demonstrates how football players can think of their lives as football players, rather than just the games, as a war-like enterprise.

One particularly telling metaphor came from a participant who worked with college football players as an academic mentor at a major university. When asked about the current climate of college football players' prioritizing the pursuit of a career in the NFL over a college degree, and if that will ever change, he offered the following metaphor:

> Interviewer: *Do you think that, that will change or do you think, do you think that even can be fixed, that mindset?*
>
> Interviewee: *Well, the problem is that society today is just maniacal. They become maniacs over sports. It's, well the Romans did that too, like the Roman gladiators. People wanted to watch the Roman gladiators and they didn't have to think about whether or not the Roman Empire and their country was falling apart. And their politicians were being corrupt or corrupted to the nth degree because hey, did you see that guy get eaten by the lion today?*
>
> *Interviewer: Right.*
>
> Interviewee *(in reference to same question): Did you see that guy chop that guy's head off? Man, let's talk about that. That's far more important than Caesar's and tyrants. So the -- you know, well the problem, I mean, they come in with these aspirations of NFL play because society has made it such that the NFL was like the ultimate masculine glorious thing to be a part of which I think, that's a*

ridiculous notion….society exalts the NFL to this ridiculous level. That I think is kind of shameful.

This metaphor is particularly interesting, as it not only uses violent imagery more generally with the comparison of getting a player's head chopped off, to not pursuing a long-term future with a college degree, but also employs a historical context of the Roman empire and the gladiator spectacle. Here, the participant attributes blame to society, who have become maniacal spectators of a hyper-masculine battle, wherein they demand and expect a certain show out of the gladiators/football players. The NFL and college football leaders are compared with "corrupted politicians," turning a blind eye to the players because of the interest the sport brings in from the public. Players are influenced by the pedestal this gladiator-like persona puts them on in society, and sacrifice their bodies to be a part of this. The participant also likens the organization of football with Caesar and the fall of the Roman Empire, in that just as the Romans faced their downfall with this type of environment, so too will football if this emphasis on the short-term severity of the sport remains unchanged. Although gladiators were seen as athletes in their time and not war-related soldiers, this metaphor highlights the hyper-masculine emphasis on violence and aggression in football, and the potential consequences of this priority.

A final metaphor displays how players conceive of the intense physicality of the sport, especially during the adrenaline rush of an actual game:

> Former NFL Player: *And there's always that guy who's the hard hitter and you know it, you got to, you know, you got to tell yourself to, you know, lay a wood on him basically, and got to fight that fear of, you know, pulling off or stopping it or whatever.*

To "lay the wood" on someone is originally a slang metaphor meaning to hit a person with a handheld item (Urban Dictionary), and has since been adopted as a common phrase among the football community, meaning to give it everything you have on the field (houstonpress.com). The usage of a weapon metaphor as a common term among those involved in professional football may serve as a telling symbol of how the organization conceives of itself as a sport in which one must use aggression in achieving success in their careers. Players and others in the community imagine players going to war as gladiators, enduring battles and fights, and "laying a wood" on someone, whether these war-like metaphors have to do with the actual time playing the game, or the host of other aspects that come along with a career in football.

Calling and Religion

Another prevalent theme in our interview data concerned the use of metaphorical language related to religion and perceiving a career in football as divine calling. An interesting discovery emerged in comparing the religious language of players (both current and former) to those less directly tied to football, e.g. coaches or other members of the football community who consistently work with these athletes. In our data, those more indirectly related to football used religious metaphor to describe something outside themselves in religious terms, such as the media or society's interactions with football. Players, on the other hand, used religious language to describe their careers as callings and divine missions. With a more negative perspective regarding the media's influence

on professional football, an interviewee who works with football players on a daily basis describes the media's coverage of the sport as a cult-like religion:

> Interviewer: *And we kept thinking that like, you're saying actually, society has like a big impact on the football players' perspective. Do you think media plays a role on that too?*
>
> Interviewee*: I don't know, but I think this -- it is the, it is the responsibility of these men to hype up sports to this de facto religion. So, we become so, now what's the right word, so our minds become so in meshed with the words and the images that are displayed on ESPN.*
>
> (in reference to same question): *..It's brainwashing, so, you know, and so they brainwash people into thinking that this sports thing it just is -- you know, they make it like an idol, they make it a religion, it's like something you worshipped almost, you know.*

Here the interviewee conceives of the media's portrayal of the sport as a "bad religion" where football players are false idols, and reporters hyperbolize their every move in an effort to brainwash the public into worshipping these athletes. Similar to the metaphor of the Roman gladiator spectacle, the media is envisioned as making a show out of the sport and its players, projecting onto them a public expectation of being superhuman and worthy of being idolized for their talents. The players are both criticized and worshipped by society, in that the public and media demand a certain view of them, but also reward them with praise when this expected image is acted out by the football players.

Another member of the football organization who works with college football players shared similar metaphors in relation to a discussion of the determining factors that influence whether or not a player has long-term success and mental health after their football career:

Interviewer: *So aside from the parents is there any other predictor?*

Interviewee: *...these guys are often looked upon, as a savior of the community and that's tough to earn. And it could be anytime, it could be the African-American community where you know unemployment is high and these guys are saviors...and they put them in a very difficult situation in my mind. We have created problems for ourselves doing that.*

This imagery creates a more complex picture of the problem with idolatry in professional and college football, in that many times these athletes are seen as "saviors" of their communities, inspiring other struggling members of the community of the possibility to rise out of their current situations through sports. This savior comparison also carries a burden for players, however, in that they must uphold the public perceptions their community has of them in order to be respected at the level they are when achieving success as a professional football player. The use of religious metaphor was well-documented through our analysis, and hinted at organizational members' perceptions of the behavior of their own organization, society, and the media in relation to a wide range of aspects a typical athlete must deal with in experiencing the sport.

In comparison to those who work with football players, the players themselves tended to refer to their talent in football as God-given, or executed through the glory of God. One Division 1 college football player recounts this experience in describing his thought process right before an important game:

Interviewer: *Now I'm going to ask some questions about during the game, what gets you in the right frame of mind or pumped up before a game?*

Interviewee: *...I mean I've tried literally to play every game completely in the spirit of the Lord and pray before every single play that I am on the field, God, I want this to be for you, this is Yours', let me function in your Spirit, let me gain You through this.*

In reference to same question: *...And because it comes from within, because it comes from my Lord and Savior in life, I feel like my job to him is to be out there and play every single solitary play up to Him. And if you're playing every single solitary plays on Him, you're going 100%, you're going -- you're trying to take people out.*

In reference to same question: *...the main reason that I play football is for Him and Him alone, and if I go out there, I could get a crap less. If there was one person in the stands or 102,000, I don't give a crap who we were playing. I don't think about rivalries, I don't think about anything, I go after with one intention, one intention well. I want to glorify my Lord and beat the crap -- whoever's crossed the field from me.*

These descriptions of football are not metaphors because players literally believe they are acting through God's will, rather than simply comparing their career decisions to a divine calling. This contrasts with the metaphorical use of religion, in that the players are completely owning and taking responsibility for their religious attributions, rather than casting them onto outside entities. In the case of the religious metaphors used by athletic staff, the conceptions were external and put upon the players, e.g. the media *made* football a de facto religion, or the community expectations of the player *made* him a savior-like figure. These players, however, fully embody their religious conceptions, wherein God's will is acted upon through them and by them. Nobody is attributing religious metaphor to the players, they take the divine mission conceptions literally and as part of their internal being. The more physical, violent aspect of this religious language used by players is especially interesting, in that the player describes "taking someone out" and "beating the crap" out of an opponent as related to these conceptions of God. The football player envisions the will of God as allowing him to be as physically severe as possible on the field, as God embodies his being to fulfill the goal of using his entire

athletic potential. The intersection of hyper-masculine violence and religious conceptions are also noticed in these descriptions, in that the embodying of God's will can lead to aggressive and hyper-masculine notions of taking someone out and incurring physical injury onto an opponent. In these types of religious language, the player conjures the image of God quite literally in speaking of his actions on the football field, wherein God is the true owner of his body, and the player is the vehicle through which God wills the performance of the player on the football field.

Another participant, a former college and NFL player who has been retired for many years, described his career with religious language at several points during the interview:

Interviewer: *Did you seriously consider any other careers?*

Interviewee: *No. God gave me a talent to play football.*

Interviewer: *So you knew? That's awesome. When did you decide that you wanted to play pro? Was that in high school?*

Interviewee: *When I was in Junior High then in eighth grade year, that's when I knew God gave me something. I was different than the other athletes, you know, I was -- I could just do it so good, you know, to myself. It was just like a man playing with boys, a man playing with toys, you know?*

A current Division 1 college football player described his calling to football in a similar way, describing his calling as a gift from God:

Interviewer: *What made you choose football over track and basketball?*

Interviewee: *Those were the abilities God blessed me with more so than track. Track is more of a hobby. I've made multiple events in track and somehow the football workout is just pretty natural…*

Interviewer: *Was there, is there any other factors why you chose football, like maybe, like, family. Do you have any family members that play? Maybe, sports idol?*

Interviewee: *Just a God given ability and I felt like he gave me a gift to do it. And I was supposed to use it.*

In both of these interviews, participants express their career decisions as not really a decision at all, but a divine call and gift from God. The retired NFL player conceptualizes the moment he knew of his calling as a divine strike, in that he believed God had given him a talent when comparing his abilities to other young boys around him. The current NCAA player also introduces this idea, in that he believed God had blessed him with football ability when he compared his talents in the sport with his track abilities. Once again, this is in stark contrast to the metaphorical language used by those who work with the players, in that the language was very much outside themselves, blaming other institutions (e.g. the media) for the emphasis on short-term, others-based thinking in football careers.

A Family Unit

A final metaphorical theme in our study related to interviewees' image of other members in the football organization as family. Many participants described their teammates as brothers, their coaches as father figures, and other members as part of a large extended family. Two different athletes, one current NCAA player and one retired NFL player, were the most direct in their metaphors, using the family conceptualization in a more explicit, straightforward manner:

Current Player (Division 1): *I'm just staying with my team that is first class and the guys on my team, you know what I mean? Because we're all going to the same workouts together every morning, you got to see them. You know we all go to the workouts together, so yeah, just my teammates.*

Interviewer: *Are those like your closest friends? No?*

Current Player: *Those are my friends. I don't call them friends, I call them family. Family away from home, that's my family right there so, definitely.*

Interviewer: *What about -- who was your, like, your favorite coach in all your time playing?*

Retired Player: *I want to say <coach name>.*

...<coach name> believed this, "If you couldn't be a part of the family, and you couldn't say 'We', you couldn't be on this team, no matter how good you are." And I used to ask him, I said, hey man, when I retire, I said, <coach name>, you get childish some parts we kick some good guys out of there. He said, "Yeah, yeah, we tell football players that they can be a part of our family. See we have a family. Yeah.

Both of these images demonstrate the conception of teammates-as-family in football. The current NCAA player relates the family notion to time spent with his teammates, describing how he goes to workouts everyday with the team, before using the family metaphor. The metaphorical power of the imagery is also strengthened by the current player's emphasis on not calling his teammates friends. They are definitely not conceived of as friends in the player's mind, and he makes this clear before going into the conception of family. The retired player reveals some of the imagery used by leaders of the team, particularly one of his favorite coaches, when he was actively playing professional football. He speaks of the coach instituting a policy of perceiving one another as family, and players are otherwise not welcome on the team if they do not share

this family conception. Ironically, the coach ends up excluding players who do not share this view of the team as a family unit, which may conflict with the view that membership in a family comes with unconditional acceptance. Prior research related to the use of "family" metaphors in the workplace has described the conflict that occurs when this all-inclusive family metaphor is unconditionally upheld by employees of an organization, and used only when advantageous by organizational leaders (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

Other participants described their experiences with more detailed metaphorical imagery, describing their teammates as brothers:

> Retired Player: ...*They're your brother, they would get on as brother versus brother was -- his son was a coach of my team, he was defense that I coach, he was really young too. He said to them guys, wait go kiss your brother, <name>, no your brother <name>. That's what <name> I did sometimes. "Hey brother, how you're doing?"*

> Current College Player: ...*And now, I'm here with people I've only known for probably a year and a half, maybe two years and like for one of those years, it was like, you see them maybe once, maybe two, three months kind of thing. So, I use it, I use football to build close relationships and, with friends and have a team bond and a good team chemistry and just try to make a brotherhood.*

Both players describe their experiences with other members of the football community as a brotherhood. In the case of the retired player, the coach led the family metaphor by telling his son to refer to the player as a brother, but the player internalized the metaphor and used it as a way to conceive of his relationship with the coach's son, referring to him as brother in a greeting. The current player explained the concept of having a "brotherhood" as an important structuring of the team in order to ensure a "bond" and "good chemistry" among teammates. The conjuring of teammates as brothers helps players to make sense of their close relationships in football. These images can

originate from the players themselves to describe the emotionality of being part of a football team, or can be conjured and communicated by leaders such as coaches, advisors, and other members of the community, and introduced into the language and imagery of players in this way—whether this language serves as a support or detriment to those members who conceive of their experiences in this way (Casey, 1999).

In the context of football leaders' relationships with the teams they advise, many conceived of these bonds as a father-son dynamic:

> Interviewer: *Do you find that throughout the process from the time they arrive as freshmen to, by the time they leave the program, do they come to you in that time to talk about future career aspirations, family issues, school issues?*
>
> Interviewee 1: *Yeah. The job of a coach, if you do it the way it should be done then you are several patch. You are, you're father figure, and then maybe, that may evolve into a brother type figure, or brother-brother type of relationship, but initially its generally father-son. You're a counselor, you're a pastor, you're a friend, you are everything that they need...*
>
> Interviewer: *Can you describe your relationship to players?*
>
> Interviewee 2: *...Knowing that there are some hard decisions that have to be made, it's nothing personal, it's just there's a business part of this but when it's -- when it doesn't have to be business, we going to make it as much, you know, all the crucial family appreciate, respect each other as much as you can because there's so much more to it than the four or five years of football that we play. So my -- that's my, I'll take that part of decision really seriously and I really work, give more time, you know, be there looking out for the brother and teach them those things as suppose a father, if I was one day. So -- I really, that's -- that's why I coach, so…*

This is another example of certain metaphorical imagery being introduced into the organization by team leaders/non-players. In the first instance, the interviewee refers to the father-son metaphor and relationship as the only way to do the job "the way it should be done," implying that this way of conceiving of the relationship is not only common,

but preferred and revered in college football teams. The second interviewee first describes the more cutthroat aspects of the business of football, and then goes into metaphorical language of a father-figure role, which seems to convey and contrast the more positive, familial aspects of being involved in a football team with the more ruthless, business side of the sport according to the participant. Each interviewee also goes back and forth between referring to the players as sons and brothers, referring to a team member as a "brother" in the second instance, and describing an evolving of the father-son role into a brotherly relationship in the first text. The metaphorical imagery the interviewees use may tell of an evolving familial relationship, wherein leaders and players begin their relationship in a more discipline-centered way, and develop into more of a brotherhood once this level of discipline is no longer deemed necessary.

The last metaphor of football-as-family is more abstract than the previous metaphors, but telling of the team-based, group mentality that is prevalent in the sport:

> <u>Interviewer:</u> *What's your sincere responsibility to the team during the game?*
>
> <u>Interviewee (Current Division 1 Player):</u> *Don't let them down. Don't disappoint my coach because he did a great job preparing you all week. I won't disappoint. I just think that I need to execute the game plan and just do my part. Don't try to be a hero because if you try to be a hero at end, you'll start screwing up things for you team. So just do your part and trust they'll do theirs. Yes, so, that's what I try to do.*

This imagery does not have the more direct, key words of family, brother, father, or son, but does elicit the conception of the team as part of a united entity that must work together to achieve the goal of shared success. Similar to the dynamics within a family, the player must sacrifice a part of his personal freedom and individuality for the good of

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the team. He also seeks approval from other team members, not wanting to "disappoint" the coach, similar to the way one would seek approval from a father figure, and views his purpose within the greater role of the team, not wanting to "screw things up" for them. The hero metaphor in this context is negatively understood, in the sense that striving to be the hero will most likely end in failure. Shared action and trust are seen as the keys to both individual and team success in the sport. The level of personal sacrifice and commitment to the whole entity in the player's description of his role within the team is reminiscent to the intensity of the familial sacrifice, and therefore felt noteworthy to include in family metaphor framework. The varied metaphors of war, religion, and family in interviewees' descriptions of their personal and professional experiences with football convey the complexity of members' conceptions of their organization and larger career.

<center>**Discussion**</center>

The participants in this study conceived of their football careers as an experience of war, a divine call and religion, and a familial bond. Football players were imagined as Roman gladiators, religious idols and saviors, sons, and brothers. They endured battles, embodied the will of God, and formed a brotherhood with their teammates and coaches. These images came from current college football players, those who work with them, and retired former players. Analyzing their accounts through a metaphorical lens allowed us to realize our ultimate goal of learning more about the career experiences of players in the sport, and how these conceptions may relate to notions of long-term personal health. Next, we continue our discussion with an examination of theoretical and practical implications related to health for players, and close with limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Theoretical Implications

In terms of the theoretical underpinnings of the study, our findings provide further insight into the pervasive use of metaphor not only in language, but in our cognitive processes and actions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), especially in relation to how organizations and workplaces are experienced. Interviewees used metaphorical language to express their experiences with anything from relationships with colleagues, coaches, and the media, to what goes through their minds in the heat of a game.

The frequent use of war metaphors in the language of organizational members emphasized cognitive processes related to the brutality that may come along with a career

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in football. Comparisons of football players to Roman gladiators aided in our

understanding of football being treated as a masculine spectacle by the media, and carried

us through the conceptualization of the "battle" and "fight" a football player must endure

if he wants to remain successful in his career. These war-related metaphors of a battle and

fight also highlight the macro-leveled, or overarching way of processing metaphors

introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), and later addressed by Cornelissen (2008).

Although these metaphors do not explicitly suggest war in their language and are more

micro-leveled or indirectly related to war, their war-like connotations allow receivers to

process the metaphors in a way that hints at the more overarching theme of a war. For

instance, enduring a battle can also be conceptualized and understood as the more broad

notion of "going to war" with someone, or having an ongoing conflict. This way of

structuring metaphorical language relates to the idea of tenor and vehicle that initially

aided our data collection process, in that the tenor or main subject of "football" can be

carried through many different war-related vehicles in its conception as war, such as a

battle, fight, conflict, or struggle. Additionally, metaphors of "laying a wood" or using a

weapon on someone as a way to compare how aggressive actions can get on a football

field also highlight the sometimes violent cognitive associations in the minds of football

players, as the interviewees conceive of their success on the field with this violent

imagery.

     Viewing football as a religious, higher-order calling and gift also helps guide

research and understanding about how metaphors are used to explain organizational

members' thought processes. When players conceptualize of their talents as being

attributed to and controlled by God, it provides a glimpse into their motivations for pursuing football. Perceiving one's career as a calling and divine purpose may imply that the control is not vested in a member's personal choices, but instead God's will. The implications of these types of metaphors may be significant for research in this area, as the comparison of a career to a divine calling hints at the motivations behind a career, and the rationale for actions that may seem detrimental to the well-being of the organizational member. This is especially relevant in the context of professional football, where the physical effects can last a lifetime. Metaphoric analysis provides a complex view into the motivations and thought processes of organizational members, and how this may affect personal career decisions.

The perception of teammates as family is also particularly telling with regard to the power of metaphorical language use in organizations. As Casey (1999) and Smith and Eisenberg (1987) describe in their studies of the use of "family" metaphors by leaders in a corporate organization, these types of conceptualizations can carry potentially negative consequences for members. Feeling as though fellow members of an organization are as close to you as an immediate family member—a brother, father, or son—may be associated with unusual levels of sacrifice that individuals are typically only willing to withstand for their family. The use of metaphor in this instance can aid researchers in understanding how and why football players are willing to sacrifice so much for their team and for the sport, through this examination of values that are communicated by the players through metaphoric imagery.

In terms of potential intersections between types of football players and metaphor use, some similarities in the language use of organizational members could lead to further insights into personal career experiences. In a few of the interviews studied, some patterns seemed to emerge regarding the types of metaphor used, and the point in the career trajectory the football player happened to be in. For instance, metaphorical language of football being a flat-out "war" tended to be used by older members of the community—those who had retired from professional football, and those who work with current NCAA football players in a leadership role. The current NCAA players themselves would use less directly related metaphorical language to the major framework of war, describing their experiences as a "battle" and "fight." This type of tendency may allude to different conceptions of career as time goes on, wherein former players and those not directly involved in the sport as players may look back on the sport with more direct war imagery, while current players think of these metaphors in a less intensely war-related sense while in the midst of their careers. An interaction between the types of metaphors used by players was also noteworthy in our study. Players who used war metaphors were more likely to also use religious metaphors, suggesting a possible connection between these two types of imagery. This linkage may provide a new framework and conception of football as not only a war, but a religious war, which may carry different meanings and intensities for players who describe their career experiences this way. Players and members of the football community who used both war and religion metaphors also seemed to have a more intense experience and opinion of their careers. Conceiving of football as both war-like and a divine mission may imply more

severe or impactful career experiences of players and other members, in that these intense metaphors may have an important connection to how these members made personal, long-term decisions in their involvement with professional football (i.e. varying levels of health considerations). The current study contributes to the theoretical understanding of how organizational members conceive of their experiences through the use and analysis of metaphor.

Practical Implications

This study is centrally concerned with the health implications of football players' conceptions of their football careers, particularly the long-term trajectories of their lives. If football players and other members of the football community conceive of their experiences with the game, colleagues, and the media as a war-like situation, this may have serious real-time implications on how they view their personal well-being and health in relation to the sport. Players who view themselves as hyper-masculine Roman gladiators may, as CTE sufferer Mike Webster put it, be willing to sacrifice decades off their lives in order to be successful in the sport (Michael, 2013). If players must "fight" and "battle" with colleagues for their livelihood in the sport, they may be willing to turn a blind eye to their own injuries and those of teammates, as seen in the surveys of professional players acknowledging the hiding of head injuries and concussions while on the field (Associated Press 2009, 2011).

As Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2014) note, conceiving of career as a calling may also have negative implications in the lives of players in terms of the sacrifices they are

willing to endure to achieve this high-order mission. This sacrifice may also materialize in the form of personal health consequences, in that players conceive of their bodies as being owned by God and His purpose. As such, personal health takes a backseat to the divine purpose of players who conceive of their football talents as a calling, in that their career choice is not so much their personal, controlled decision, but instead guided by the mission to which God and their calling have assigned them. Imagining career choices in such an intense way implies a person will sacrifice their entire beings, including their bodies and health, in order to fulfill their ultimate purpose. This same notion of sacrifice applies to conceptions of teammates as family. Just as one is willing to sacrifice anything for their actual, immediate families, so too are they willing to do anything for others whom they conceive of as family. As such, personal considerations like long-term health and wellness may be left to the wayside if these individual actions do not benefit other organizational members, or the team and organization as a whole.

With these considerations of health implications, our findings could help players become more aware of how the metaphors they use to explain their experiences with football may shape their career decisions. An awareness of this type of language could then aid players in managing their short and long-term wellness on and off the field. If players no longer deny their own health concerns, this may spark a demand from the players themselves for a change in the current climate and culture of professional football, so that more precautions are taken by the NFL, regulatory agencies, the medical community, and the public to better manage the safety and health of players. Through this awareness and management of long-term health, players may possibly be seen less as

masculine gladiators, and more as complex human beings with a range of concerns about

their well-being in their present careers and long-term future.

Limitations and Future Research

One potential drawback of our study is not utilizing a metaphorical framework in creating our interview questions. In Cowan and Bochantin's (2011) metaphorical analysis of blue collar employees' work/life metaphors, one aspect of their interview data involved prompting metaphors from participants by asking the question: "The relationship between work and life is like _____" (p. 22). Because our study did not initially seek to examine metaphorical language use, our analysis was based on the natural flow of conversation in the interview, from our questions about various aspects of the experience of football. More metaphors could have been extracted from the interview data if we extrapolated metaphoric imagery in this way, which possibly might have lead to more themes in the types of metaphors organizational members used in their descriptions. Future research on the metaphorical language conceptions of athletes, and organizational research using metaphorical analysis in general, may try to develop strategies like these to make the elicitation of metaphors from participants more fruitful. This may hinder the natural ease with which some of the metaphors were conjured in members' visualizations, but could also aid in recognizing patterns and themes regarding what types of metaphors are commonly used by a group.

Another possible limitation of our study concerns the metaphoric framework used, or the three main categories of war, religion, and family that guided our analysis. Although we felt most of the metaphors related to each framework in some way, it may have suited our research to add a few more categories in the framework, in order to better include some metaphors that were more indirectly related to the three categories. For

instance, the gladiator metaphor used in the war section might have worked well in another category related to hyper-masculine notions of violence, as the gladiator metaphor itself was not as directly related to war as the intense violence the gladiator spectacle portrayed. This improvement in the study may also be applied to the analysis of religious language in our study, wherein the descriptions of divine calling in players' career choices were not seen as a metaphor to the players' as they actually believed God has bestowed them with this talent. Although this language portrayed the way players embody and conceive of the will of God in their career decisions and sacrifices, these descriptions were not technical metaphors, and a more diverse framework may have helped to better explain this regular occurrence in our interview data.

In examining the metaphors used by members of the football community in describing their experiences in the sport, we have gained insight into the perceptions, meanings, and struggles of those involved in a career and life of football. These metaphorical conceptions provide a unique way of revealing thought processes within athletes about their organization, as "the generalizations governing poetic metaphorical expressions are not in language, but in thought: they are general mappings across conceptual domains" (Lakoff, 1993, p. 203). In communicating their thought processes through metaphor, these organizational members envision and make sense of their own conditions, while also permitting the reader to gain a more complex, meaningful understanding of their experience.

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