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A metaphor analysis of older adults' lived experience of household isolation during COVID-19

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In March 2020, Public Health England provided social distancing and shielding guidance for all adults aged 70 and over in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article seeks to provide insight into the lived experiences of older people during this period of household isolation. To do so, we analysed the metaphors used by 13 older adults during interviews discussing their experiences of household isolation, focusing on how these metaphors relate to a loss of agency. We found that participants negotiated their sense of agency through the use of metaphors involving physical force, movement, space, and animation of COVID-19. Metaphors were particularly used to discuss negative emotional impacts of the pandemic. Perceptions of a loss of agency were sometimes redressed through the use of comforting metaphors involving patterns and structure. In addition, participants explicitly rejected or refashioned dominant public metaphors that circulated as part of Government campaigns and wider public discourse to describe the pandemic and encourage certain behaviors. It has been argued that commonly used metaphors relating to containment, e.g., "bubble", when applied to the context of household isolation, foreground the actions of those outside the container rather than those inside it, leading to a loss of feelings of agency. The participants' reactions to these suggest that common metaphors in public discourses are appropriated selectively and challenged by those at whom they are targeted. Hence, metaphor analysis can be used to paint a rich picture of the lived experience of older people experiencing household isolation, including their reaction to dominant public metaphors.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, older adults, metaphor, household-isolation, agency, terminology, language

Introduction and background to the study

In the United Kingdom (UK), from 23 March−1 May 2020, Public Health England (PHE) provided guidance for those aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions, which recommended social distancing with, and within, their household. Further advice included the need to significantly limit face-to-face interactions with friends and family, to arrange deliveries of food, medicines, and essential services, to access medical assistance remotely, and to postpone routine medical appointments. The only reason for leaving the house was to take daily exercise.

One way to gain deeper insight into people's lived experience during this time is to look at the language they use when describing their time of household isolation, with a particular focus on metaphor, as metaphor analysis has been shown to be a useful tool for exploring people's emotional responses to their lived experiences. Metaphors provide a precise and efficient way of describing complex ideas and experiences (Colston and Gibbs, 2021) and offer an effective means to communicate the qualitative aspects of internal states. For this reason, when people experience challenging, new situations, they often reach for metaphor as a tool to help them make sense of and express their experiences (Semino, 2011). People produce more metaphors when describing intense emotional experiences than when describing actions (Fainsilber and Ortony, 1987) and they generate more novel metaphors when writing about their own emotional experiences than when writing about the feelings of others (Williams-Whitney et al., 1992). An example of the central role of metaphor in enabling people to express and come to terms with challenging experiences is provided by Gibbs and Franks (2002), who found a particularly high density of powerful metaphors in the narratives produced by women diagnosed with cancer. Here, metaphor allowed these women to conceptualize and express the illness and its complex and disorientating impacts more clearly. Studying the metaphors that people use in emotionally difficult situations is a powerful tool for identifying the ways in which people experience and respond to those situations (Littlemore and Turner, 2019a,b; Turner et al., 2020). Some metaphors that people use are highly idiosyncratic and provide insights into the particular ways in which they are experiencing a given situation. Others will be more conventional, and are more likely to have been acquired through exposure to the wider linguistic environment. These more conventional metaphors also provide insights into people's lived experiences insofar as these experiences are socially constructed and shaped by the broader social and linguistic context in which they took place.

There have been a small number of studies outside of the UK in which researchers have used metaphor as a lens to investigate the lived experiences of those affected by COVID-19. For example, in their study of metaphors employed by 210 Turkish adults to describe their experiences of living with COVID-19, Gök and Kara (2021) identified seven metaphor categories which they labeled: being restricted, restlessness, uncertainty/obscurity, deadly/dangerous, struggling, faith/destiny, and supernatural. They then distilled these categories into three themes, which they labeled: anxiety/concern, risk, and faith. In their analysis of what they describe as the "collective trauma" caused by COVID-19 in the USA, Stanley et al. (2021) interviewed 44 participants, asking them to compare the pandemic with an animal and a color, and then to provide explanations for their choices. Stanley et al. (2021) used their findings to identify four mental models of participants' experiences (uncertainty, danger, grotesqueness, and misery) and four emotions that were associated with those mental models (grief, disgust, anger, and fear). Through their analysis of the metaphors used to describe these mental models, the researchers were able to identify the qualitative aspects of their participants' lived experiences that are unlikely to have been revealed by other more "literal" research methods (Stanley et al., 2021).

In a study that was conducted in Wuhan, Deng et al. (2021) interviewed 27 Wuhan residents about their lived experiences of COVID-19. They found that their participants employed many different metaphors to convey the emotions, including feelings of isolation, that they had experienced during the pandemic. Most of these metaphors drew on embodied sensorimotor experiences such as the use of body parts, battling, hitting, weight, temperature, spatialization, motion, violence, light, and journeys, and they concluded that the bodily experiences of the pandemic, the environment, and psychological factors had combined to shape the way in which people used metaphor to construe their experiences. Finally, Bailey et al. (2021) examined the physical and mental health of older adults (aged 70+) in Ireland and elsewhere while isolating at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that the idea of "cocooning" was often contested or resisted, with participants in the study saying that they disliked the term as it made them feel infantilized. These studies show that by analyzing the metaphors that people employ and their responses to metaphors that are in the public domain, we can identify the complexities and nuances embedded within people's emotional reactions to the pandemic. Metaphor analysis is therefore a promising methodology for the study of the way in which older adults in England experienced the pandemic and its associated need for household isolation.

Metaphors are not only present in the way individuals talk about their own experiences, but also in the wider context of public discourse. Public discourses around COVID-19 in the UK, and specifically the need for older adults to isolate within their households, contained specific terminology, much of which was characterized by the use of metaphor. This led to several investigations into the ways in which metaphors have been

used in the public realm to frame COVID-19. One of the key findings from these studies is that the pandemic was frequently framed through war-related metaphors, which communicate the severity of the COVID-19 and the necessity of stringent protective measures to limit the spread of the virus (Olza et al., 2021). Such framings (e.g., "battles", "frontline", "combat") are not unprecedented; war-based metaphorical imagery has also been dominant in discourses surrounding earlier flu-like pandemics (Taylor and Kidgell, 2021). The use of war metaphors such as these has been criticized for, amongst other things, reducing complex social issues to a simple dichotomous conflict against an external enemy (Chapman and Miller, 2020), and provoking anxiety amongst the public (Sabucedo et al., 2020).

This has led several metaphor researchers to challenge the dominant "war"-focused metaphorical rhetoric and propose alternative metaphorical formulations that allow the pandemic to be conceptualized in different ways. The most important of these is the #ReframeCovid multilingual database. This database contains instances of metaphors that offer alternative ways of describing the pandemic. Examples include framing the virus in terms of a fire or natural disaster and framing distancing and isolation practices in terms of hibernation (Pérez-Sobrino et al., 2021).

Another criticism that has been leveled at public discourse around COVID-19 in the UK is its use of metaphors that appear to attribute a lack of agency (i.e., the amount of control that one has, or feels that one has, over one's own situation) to people who need to self-isolate (Charteris-Black, 2021). Charteris-Black (2021) observes the frequent use of containment-related metaphors, expressed through phrases such as "bubble", "pocket", "pod", "cocoon", "petri dish", and "protective ring". He states that, when used in discussions of isolation and social distancing, these framings foreground the actions of those outside the container rather than those inside it. He also suggests that these metaphors form part of an "overt moral coercion" as they are designed to provoke a strong emotional reaction which is expected to influence behavior, and lead to a reduction in feelings of empowerment by those who are obliged to isolate within their household. He goes on to suggest that these feelings of disempowerment can be exacerbated by the use of metaphors in which COVID-19 is personified as an "invisible enemy" or even an "alien apocalypse" (Charteris-Black, 2021).

Crucially, Charteris-Black (2021) contends that the repeated use of metaphorical formulations such as those discussed above may have led people who were required to self-isolate to internalize the idea that they lack agency. This contention is not without foundation. There is extensive evidence from metaphor "framing studies" suggesting that metaphors can exert a powerful influence over people's reasoning abilities and decision-making (Thibodeau et al., 2017; Panzeri et al., 2021). For example, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2013) presented participants with one of two versions of a newspaper article about a crime in a fictional American city, and asked them to state what they thought the best solution to the problem might be. One group of participants was shown a version of the text in which crime was described metaphorically as a "virus" and the other group was shown a version in which it was described metaphorically as a "beast". Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2013) found that those participants who had seen crime framed as a virus were more likely to make recommendations involving education and reform, whereas those who had seen it framed as a beast were more likely to recommended punishment and imprisonment. Similar studies have since examined the framing effects of metaphor in different contexts, with mixed results. The strength of the effect has been found to vary considerably depending on the positioning of the metaphor, its creativity and the extent to which it is extended in the text (Steen et al., 2014; Reijnierse et al., 2015), and the methods employed in the studies (Boeynaems et al., 2017). However, in general, there does appear to be a strong body of evidence suggesting that at least to some extent, metaphors that are used by others to frame a given situation do have the ability to affect the ways in which people think about that situation.

It is therefore possible that metaphors employed by politicians and others in the public arena to frame the pandemic and the need to self-isolate may have influenced the way those involved think about household isolation, especially those who have had to spend long periods in isolation, such as older adults. Hence, by exploring the metaphors used by participants, including those metaphors found in public discourse (such as containment metaphors, war metaphors, and so on) this study also seeks to gain some insight into the extent to which they have taken these views on board and the extent to which they feel able to challenge them.

The aims of this study

In this study, we analyzed the metaphors used by older adults in the UK when talking about their experiences of household isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic with a view to answering a general research question:

- What metaphors do older adults in the UK who have had to self-isolate use to describe their lived experience and what do they use them to talk about?

And a more specific research question:

- To what extent have older adults in the UK who have had to self-isolate appropriated metaphors used in public discourse that are thought to have reduced their sense of agency?

To answer these research questions, we identified the metaphors employed by older adults in the UK to describe their experiences of self-isolation. We then focused specifically on metaphors that reveal the degree of agency they experienced and their attitudes toward household isolation. This approach enabled us to gain deeper insight into their lived experience, especially their feelings of agency (or lack thereof), as well as to what extent they had accepted or rejected the metaphors used in public discourses around COVID-19 and instructions to isolate within their household.

The study employed a subset of data that was primarily designed to explore the longitudinal impact of COVID-19 on older people, gathered by one of the authors of this paper. To gain insights into the lived experiences of older adults who had to isolate within their household in England and the Republic of Ireland, author 5 interviewed 19 older adults, exploring if or how isolation and social distancing impacted their lives.

In this paper, we report findings from a secondary analysis, focusing on the use of metaphor in a subset of transcripts ($n = 13$), exploring the ways in which participants use metaphors to describe their experiences, in order to provide insights into their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes during this unprecedented crisis. We are particularly interested in identifying (a) what their use of metaphor reveals about the ways in which they negotiate agency and (b) the ways in which they respond to metaphors that are prevalent in public discourses around COVID-19.

Methodology

The study employed a subset of the data from COVID-19 study reported in Brooke and Clark (2020) and Brooke et al. (2022). Following ethical approval provided by the University Research Ethics Committee at Birmingham City University (6290/Am/2020/Apr/HELS FAEC), the original data was collected from 19 participants in England and the Republic of Ireland, who each completed six qualitative semi-structured interviews. Five interviews were completed at 2-week intervals and a final sixth interview was completed a month following the fifth interview. Participants were informed of the purpose and structure of the study beforehand and were given the opportunity to ask questions. Subsequently, informed consent was obtained verbally on the phone, which was recorded (see Brooke and Clark, 2020 for more information).

In the current secondary analysis, whose findings we present below, we analyzed the metaphors employed by 13 of the older adults in the original transcripts to describe their experiences of household isolation. This subset comprises only participants who live in England, given that the Republic of Ireland provided different national (government) guidance.

The transcripts were annotated for linguistic metaphor using Cameron and Maslen's (2010) approach to metaphor identification, which classifies metaphor at the level of the meaning unit rather than only focusing on individual lexical items. This allows the researcher to capture particular experiences that are described through metaphor. According to Cameron and Maslen (2010) p. 102–103, "linguistic metaphor can be operationalized … through identifying words or phrases that can be justified as somehow anomalous, incongruous or 'alien' in the on-going discourse, but that can be made sense of through a transfer of meaning in the context." Following Steen et al. (2010), this transfer of meaning was coded as metaphor when it involved a comparison with a more basic sense. This basic sense could be more concrete, or more strongly related to a physical or bodily action than the contextual meaning. If the phrase had a more basic current–contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, and the contextual meaning contrasted with the basic meaning but could be understood in comparison with it, it was marked as metaphorical. Our method departed from Steen et al.'s (2010) method in that we allowed word class boundaries to be crossed. For example, we considered the verb "cocooned" to be metaphorical as it can be understood *via* a process of comparison with the literal noun "cocoon". In the majority of cases, the presence of a more basic sense was clear to the coders. In cases where the coders were unsure whether there was a more basic sense, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (2022) was consulted.

Under this technique resulting from a combination of Cameron and Maslen (2010) and Steen et al. (2010), an expression such as "my wings are clipped" would be coded as a single metaphorical expression as the metaphorical meaning is conveyed by the whole expression rather than by the individual words that it contains. There is, however, a clear comparison with a more basic sense in which a bird that has had its wings clipped is physically unable to fly.

It is important to note that neither of these methods distinguishes between metaphors based on their conventionality. As a result, the metaphors identified in this study range from common conventional metaphors to highly idiosyncratic metaphors. However, what unifies the metaphors discussed below are shared themes or topics.

The technique employed here is particularly useful for analyzing the ideas that the metaphors are being used to convey and for identifying systematic uses of related metaphors (see Cameron, 2003, 2007; Low et al., 2008). In this study, metaphors were coded according to (a) the category of metaphor, (b) the topic that they were being used to discuss, and (c) whether they performed an evaluative function, and if so, whether the evaluation was positive, negative, or both (valence). Cases where participants commented on metaphors that are used in the media were also recorded. For example, the metaphor "I'm just plodding along" was coded as (a) "moving ego" metaphor that was (b) being used to talk about life and that was (c) not evaluative. The metaphor "the virus … will still be there somewhere, lurking waiting to bounce" was classified as (a) an

animation metaphor that was (b) used to talk about the virus and that (c) conveyed negative evaluation. It should be noted that neither the categories or topics were mutually exclusive, so some metaphors were coded as fitting into more than one category or applying to more than one topic.

Three metaphor researchers (authors 1, 2 & 3) were responsible for the identification of the metaphors, their categories, the topics that they were used to talk about, and their valence. To establish the protocol, the three researchers initially met and worked through three of the thirteen transcripts together. This process resulted in the identification of core a set of metaphor categories, each of which had one or more instantiation in the corpus that would form the focus of the identification procedure in the remaining 10 transcripts. The three coders also discussed each instantiation of metaphor within these categories and coded it according to (a) the topic that it was being used to described and (b) whether it performed a (positive or negative) evaluative function. After this calibration meeting had taken place, two of the metaphor researchers (authors 1 & 2) coded one transcript each and met to verify each other's coding and resolve ambiguous cases where the metaphoricity or the valence of a particular utterance was unclear. They then met with the third researcher (author 3) to corroborate the identification and discuss any remaining ambiguous cases. At this stage, further categories and topics of metaphor were identified and the three original transcripts were checked for metaphors that these could apply to. This procedure was repeated four more times, with the same coders responsible for the same parts of the procedure until all the transcripts had been coded for metaphor categories, topics, and valence. These preliminary findings were discussed with authors 4, 5. This iterative reflexive process enabled us to identify the metaphor categories, topics, and valence that emerged from the data.

Findings

Introduction

Here we provide an account of the different ways participants experienced the household isolation, seen through the lens of the metaphors that they employed to describe their experiences. In Table 1 we see a breakdown of the topics that participants used metaphor to discuss, and information on the extent to which the metaphors conveyed a negative evaluation of the topic.

These topics emerged through an iterative coding process (see above). Some metaphors were used to convey more than one topic. When this occurred they were coded under both topics. It is interesting to note that the topic of "emotions" attracted the highest number of metaphors and that in most cases (even in comparison to the other topics) they were used to perform a negative evaluation. Metaphors were labeled as belonging to the category of "emotions", either when an explicit reference was made to a particular emotion (e.g., "There has been a background of fear behind all of this") or when the qualitative nature of an emotion was described metaphorically (e.g., "it has been very up and down this time" in response to "how are you?"). Overall, we did not find a tendency toward negative or positive metaphors in individual participants or across the participants as a whole. However, we did still find it useful to look at whether individual metaphors were used positively or negatively, particularly when they were used to refer to emotions.

One of the aims of the study was to explore the extent to which the participants employed metaphors used in wider public discourse to describe the pandemic, most notably war metaphors and metaphors of containment. To begin to answer this question, we first present our findings regarding the broad categories of metaphors that we identified in our data. These are shown in Table 2.

In Table 2, we can see that most of the metaphor categories that we identified involved reference to broad categories of human experience (e.g., fighting and physical force, physical support, and space). We also had a final category of one-off "miscellaneous" metaphors which did not fit into any of the larger categories, but which referred to more specific human experiences. These included metaphors such as: "Us oldies will be the last in the queue" or "I have had a long innings" (one of the few metaphors which referred to sport).

We can see from Table 2 that participants did indeed employ containment metaphors and fighting/war metaphors. Half of the containment metaphors were used to perform a negative evaluation, and three quarters of the fighting/physical force metaphors were used negatively. At first sight, these figures appear to suggest that the participants had indeed adopted the two main categories of metaphor that have been identified as being both prevalent and potentially problematic in public discourse. However, when we explored the data in a more qualitative way, studying the metaphors in context, we found that the picture was somewhat more complicated than this; feelings of agency (or lack thereof) were expressed through a range of different metaphors, and in many cases, participants appeared to resist the metaphors used in dominant public discourses. Our qualitative analysis therefore revealed a somewhat different (much richer) picture than that suggested by our quantitative analysis. Through this analysis, we identified four aspects of the experience of the household isolation, all of which relate in some way to the issue of control. These are: metaphors that appeared to relate directly to agency; metaphors involving patterns and structure; metaphorical construals of time; and participants' reactions to metaphors that have been used to discuss COVID-19 and isolation. These are discussed in the following sections.

TABLE 1 Topics that were discussed using metaphor.

Metaphor topic	Description of topic	Example from data*	Number of metaphors	Proportion of which were negative
COVID-19	Talking about the virus itself	*It doesn't mean **the virus** has disappeared, it will still be lurking there*	7	0.71
Public action	Talking about the action taken by the public in reaction to the virus, including lockdown measures	*So there is two ends of the **social distancing**, of the spectrum*	17	0.47
Emotional support	Talking about the ways others emotionally assist them	*I don't think [friends] are getting the same **support** [as me]*	4	0.5
Emotions	Talking about the ways they are feeling, including explicitly labeling emotions	*It is the little minor **frustrations** are creeping in*	56	0.73
Life	Talking about their day-to-day experience or overarching lifetime	*It is slipping back to **how I remember it as a child***	14	0.71
Time	Talking about progressing through the period of household isolation	*The **days** seem to be slipping by*	44	0.25
Being isolated	Talking about their own experience of the household isolation they have been instructed to partake in	*I have been very nicely **cocooned***	16	0.5
Relationships	Talking about the way they relate to their friends and family	*All deaths made that a very particular sort of vacuum **between us***	11	0.36
Identity	Talking about the way they see themselves or believe they are seen by others	*It can be quite patronizing the way people **categorize you and put you into a box***	3	0.33

*Metaphors underlined and relevance to topic in bold.

Metaphors that are directly related to agency: Physical force, movement, and space

Many participants used metaphors to comment on their perceived lack of control over their circumstances. As we stated above, it has been suggested that the ways in which containment and personification metaphors were used in public discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK involved behavioral nudging that may have led to a loss of agency in those who needed to isolate (Charteris-Black, 2021), including older adults who were deemed to be particularly vulnerable to infection. Through qualitative analysis of our data, we found that the participants' concerns regarding agency were expressed through their use of several different metaphors, namely: physical force, movement, space, and animation, which were often used in combination.

The participants' perceived lack of control was apparent in the metaphors they employed to animate COVID-19 itself. COVID-19, which does not literally have agency, is lifted into an animated state where the virus becomes a living animal-like "thing" capable of goal-directed movement, as we can see in the following examples[1]:

> "Viruses don't just disappear, we are not going to arrive at the 30th June and we have not lost anybody that week, it doesn't mean the virus has disappeared, it will still be there somewhere, lurking waiting to bounce." (Martha)[2].
>
> "You can't have the virus running rampant there." (Carole, talking about the island she comes from)
>
> "It is interesting people still don't recognize that this virus will not just disappear, there are still people who think a couple of more weeks, and the virus will have died if you like, for want of a better expression." (Martha)

Both of Martha's examples above share the sentiment that coronavirus is omnipresent, and occupying physical space, which Katherine also expresses when she refers to the virus as the sword of Damocles:

> "It is a bit like the sword of Damocles, like an overhanging threat, which is constantly there in the background."

Interestingly, both Louise and Martha portrayed the virus as "lurking", a state that is defined as preceding an attack (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2022). In describing COVID-19 as "lurking", Louise and Martha drew on the "fighting"

1 Longer quotes have been provided for context, but the metaphorical phrase has been underlined.

2 Pseudonyms are used for all the participants in the study.

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TABLE 2 Broad categories of metaphor identified in the transcripts.

Metaphor category	Description of category	Example from data	Number	Proportion of which were negative
Containment	Drawing on physical restriction or repression	*You get in a bubble*	21	0.48
Fighting, physical force and animation	Relating to physical contact or movement, including fighting and war imagery	*They feel they will be pushed over the edge*	35	0.77
Physical support	Pertaining to the physical underpinning of something	*I have a lot of support in place*	5	0.4
Shape and structure	Pertaining to physical structures or shapes	*I feel there is going to be a second wave as they have opened the doors a little bit*	18	0.39
Space	Pertaining to physical space, e.g., on a spectrum from left to right, top to bottom, or front to back	*There is always a background anxiety*	55	0.67
Moving ego	Relating to time, whereby time stands still and the person moves forward or backwards through it	*Going back to childhood days*	8	0.25
Moving time	Relating to time, whereby the person stands still and time moves past them	*I don't want time to go very quickly*	27	0.22
Medical	Drawing on the field of medicine, surgery, or health	*I am beginning to get withdrawal symptoms from my family*	3	0.67
Miscellaneous	Metaphors which made a comparison but which did not draw on the above categories, including one-off similes	*It is like walking on a postage stamp*	32	0.69

*Metaphors underlined.

frame to make sense of their experience. As such, the virus was implicitly construed as an opponent in a fight, "waiting to bounce". This idea of fighting an animal-like virus was not uncommon in our data.

At first sight, this finding appears to suggest that the participants had adopted the "war" metaphors that have been identified as being prevalent in public discourse. However, most of the metaphors that related to fighting tended to refer to individual circumstances and there were very few references to any kind "national war effort". One exception to this is Walter's description of panic-buying, in which he says that "everybody thought it was going to be a siege". Here, he appears to be referring to a specific battle-scenario that parallels his experience by highlighting the feelings of entrapment. He appears to be covertly critical of the war metaphor and how it appears to shape people's behavior. Other participants did employ metaphors related to war and fighting, but rather than using them to talk about the virus itself, they used them to criticize the government's response to the virus, so the topic was different. For example, when speaking about the "track and trace" system, Hilda remarked:

> "I think initially it sounded like a good idea but I think it might actually be a weapon that might come back to hit us big time".

Here, Hilda construes one of the COVID-19 response measures as a "weapon", expressing a critical attitude toward it and displaying a degree of uncertainty and skepticism toward the government strategies that were being devised to protect the population. She thus refers to a lack of control at a national level.

Metaphors that appeared to involve fighting were much more likely to foreground physical force and movement rather than "war" *per se*. Thus, there appears to be little evidence of any wholesale adoption by the participants in our study of the war and fighting metaphors that dominated much of the public discourse surrounding COVID-19.

Many of the metaphors that participants employed involved references to physical force and revealed a sense of powerlessness in the face of this force. Katherine talked repeatedly about the "impact" that various experiences had on her and others. These included the emotional impact of isolation or hearing about deaths, and the more physical impact of the virus:

> "I can imagine this seclusion for a lot of people [. . .] will have a huge impact on their mental ability."
>
> "As I say, [lockdown] is not having a great deal of impact on me at the minute."
>
> "I am concerned of the impact [catching coronavirus] would have on us."
>
> "That is going to have an impact when I hear some of the distressing stories of people's experiences... I can't help it,

> I am compelled to put the TV on for the latest update, and I look at the figures and think horrendous, and I think that is going to have an impact on me for sure, and will increase my levels of anxiety."

Here, "impact" can be seen as a metaphor because it is used to describe the effect or influence that an event or situation has on someone in terms of the more basic and concrete sense of "the force of one object hitting another" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online, 2022). However, it should be noted that the non-literal use of "impact" is very conventionalised.

The idea of physical force is particularly strong in Louise's comment: "Do other people say that as well, that they feel they will be pushed over the edge?" In contrast, this same idea of "pushing" is used in a more positive way by Vincent, when he talks about how the sense of community has improved due to household isolation measures: "this has sort of pushed it together".

Other metaphors relating physical force and movement also revealed participants' perceived lack of agency; particularly, references to emotions being *up* or *down* were frequent in the data. Many examples of these embodied "emotion as physical movement through space" metaphors are built on the well-established "positive is up" and "negative is down" metaphors. For example, Martha says: "most of the time I am fine, just sometimes a low mood will strike". This draws on both movement and physical force, positioning herself as the one taking an emotional blow. However, this low mood is not constant. In fact, several participants described their moods as fluctuating by metaphorically locating emotion on a vertical axis:

> "It has been very up and down this time, I haven't been very well, so that sort of threw me a bit." (Barbara)
>
> "I think there has been an escalation of emotions, that has been a bit of a roller coaster" (Katherine)

Katherine's description of her emotions as being on a roller coaster is particularly illuminating with reference to agency, as it foregrounds the loss of control over her emotions, because a rollercoaster cannot be steered. There are also references to activities that "lift" or "stabilize" participants' mood, help them cope and foster wellbeing. Jessica, for example, recounts how going for a walk with her daughter "gave [her] a big boost actually". Freda says, "If I am painting, my mind stays fairly stable", suggesting that creative expression helps her to control her mood.

Participants" relationships with agency were also revealed by the ways in which they used metaphor to animate feelings or reactions, thereby transferring the potential for agency to their emotional states, which made them more difficult to control:

> "There has been the odd frustrations, which have probably crept in this week." (Katherine)
>
> "The little minor frustrations are creeping in." (Jessica)
>
> "It is those little things that jump on and bite you in the bum." (Jessica)
>
> "A little bit of confusion crept in I think." (Katherine)

Both Katherine and Jessica describe frustrations as entities entering their space and thereby affecting them, with the word "creeping" shading this experience as decidedly negative and unwanted, maybe even scary. Jessica ascribes agency to "the little things", suggesting that although these may not be things of objective magnitude, they nonetheless have the power to affect her.

Other participants also use metaphors that locate emotion in space, but without animating these states:

> "There is always a background anxiety about some of my family members." (Edith)
>
> "There has been a background of fear behind all of this, fear I might pick it up, I might not survive." (Katherine)

Both participants describe their negative emotions (anxiety and fear) as taking up room within their mental space. It seems that the location of the emotion within that mental space also indicates its prominence, or, metaphorically speaking, the amount of room it takes up. While their anxiety and fear are not at the forefront of their minds, they seem to be omnipresent in the background.

Stephen also draws on metaphors involving location in space when he commented: "I don't think we should become prisoners of fear". Charteris-Black (2021) notes that confinement metaphors commonly used in public discourses around the pandemic can be positively or negatively framed, depending on whether they employ "imprisonment" or "public safety" as the source domain. In his prison metaphor, which may be borne out of dominant public narratives, Stephen warns that we should not allow these anxieties to take up more space. This suggests a very strongly negative metaphor, where fear imprisons people completely.

Thus, we see a wide variety of metaphors being used to refer to participants' feelings of agency vs. helplessness when faced with the virus and household isolation. On balance, they appear to convey a degree of powerlessness but are not entirely pessimistic. Some of the metaphors they use do resemble those used in public discourse, but we cannot say whether they have been acquired through exposure to such discourse or whether they constitute standard ways of expressing the kinds of emotions that one would expect to feel in such a situation.

Metaphors involving patterns and structure

Some participants referred to a need for structure to counterbalance the feeling of a lack of agency, as represented by a regular pattern in their lives. For example, Jessica's desire for structure and control becomes apparent in the way she talks of doing activities, including jigsaw puzzles, at certain times of the day: "I am a jigsaw puzzle addict, well not an addict as I have never had the time, so I am doing all my jigsaws I have done for presents, so I don't sit down until about 4 o'clock. Then it is an hour's jigsaw and then it is the government's briefing, and then cook tea and watch the telly". Furthermore, there is a sense of structure in the very act of completing a jigsaw puzzle, which provides an interesting overlap between the metaphorical and literal. Hilda also explains how she finds the communications about government restrictions confusing, which is difficult for her because she is "a rules girl". This suggests that, like Jessica, Hilda also views structure as a positive thing that would help her deal with the difficult situation of household isolation.

The participants' desire for structure was also often expressed through metaphors referring to different patterns that they appeared to find comforting in the context of the household isolation. For some participants, the imposition of structure served as a mechanism through which they could re-introduce a level of control over their lives. For example, Jessica repeats the metaphor of structure both in reference to the hours of a day, and life overall:

> "I have got to have structure to my life."
> "You have to have structure within your *day*."
> "He needs a structure in his life."

Here, the word "structure" can be interpreted as metaphorical because Jessica is using it in an abstract way to describe the non-physical organization of her life. This meaning can be compared with a more basic sense of the word structure, which is defined by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (2022) as: "something that has been built, especially something large such as a building or bridge". It should be noted that, as with "impact" in the previous section on metaphors that are directly related to agency, the non-literal meaning of the word "structure" is also highly conventional.

For Jessica, planning things appears to be a way of coping with a lack of control over the time passing and the restrictions of household isolation. She did this frequently in the first three interviews, but did not make any references to structure in the final three interviews, perhaps because the need for structure became less prevalent after many weeks of household isolation, or perhaps because she had adjusted to the situation, and accepted that her agency was limited by events outside of her control.

Other participants also refer to structure when reflecting on their lack of agency during household isolation. For instance, Trevor repeats a metaphor about "rigidity":

> "There is a rigidity about [your day], I think it is that you have to accept that or you might get a bit frustrated with it."
>
> "I think people understand, but you have to build a rigidity into [government guidelines], and people can stick to them or not."

Unlike Jessica's evaluation of structure as a positive thing that helps her cope, Trevor seems to see it as neutral, as he uses it to describe the situation rather than evaluate it, which could be because he is not struggling to cope with the conditions of household isolation as much as some other participants.

Although all these participants use structure to reflect on the degree of control that they feel they have over their lives, they do not refer to the same kind of structures. While Jessica imposes the structure on her own life through timetabling her activities, Trevor describes the structure imposed on the public by mandatory household isolation. Hence, structure can be both positive and negative: for Jessica it is a necessity in her life, whereas for Trevor, structure is a vital but not necessarily positive restrictive measure. This highlights how structure is linked to participants' sense of agency; where Jessica experiences structure as something that helps her reclaim agency over her life, Trevor refers to structure as an imposition which reduces agency.

Metaphorical construals of time

Participants often reflected on the passing of and their relationship with time, revealing their sense of agency (or lack thereof). For example, Freda reflects on her relationship with and control over time when discussing what the concept of "the future" means for older people, who do not have as much time left: "There is not that sort of future to make plans for;" "To accept, in a way, living day-by-day;" "It isn't a sort of fear of dying, it is sort of trying to manage the time you have left, without bringing grief to yourself and other people." Participants also used metaphor to talk about time, which we separated into two categories: "moving ego" and "moving time".

Boroditsky and Ramscar's (2002) study of "moving time" vs. "moving ego" is one of the most widely-cited pieces of work on the metaphorical relationship between time and space. Two contrasting perspectives are implicit in English expressions relating to time: the moving time metaphor conceptualizes time as moving forward toward the ego and the moving ego metaphor

conceptualizes the ego as moving forward toward the future. When people are asked "Next Wednesday's meeting has been moved forward 2 days; when is the meeting now that it has been rescheduled?", individuals employing a "moving time" metaphor will report that it has been moved to Monday, whereas individuals employing a "moving ego" metaphor will report that it has been moved to Friday.

Participants tended to use the "moving time" perspective more than the "moving ego" perspective, which at first sight suggests that they felt a lack of control over their lives. Almost all instances of moving time are to comment on their perception of time going quickly rather than slowly – sometimes positively, and sometimes negatively. For example, some participants talk of time moving quickly in a negative sense, some explicitly due to their age:

> "Time is going very quickly, I don't want time to go very quickly!" (Barbara)
> "It is scary how quickly the *day* goes, and I do sleep OK, I dream quite a lot, but the days and weeks do go so quickly." (Jessica)

Many participants combine moving time and moving ego metaphors. Below are some examples of moving time:

> "Time seems to be whizzing past." (Edith)
> "It is extraordinary how quickly it comes round." (Edith)
> "We will have to face that when it comes." (Martha)
> "I know how time flies." (Hilda)
> "The days seem to be slipping by." (Hilda)

However, the same participants also use moving ego metaphors:

> "I am just plodding along." (Edith)
> "It is going forward further than that." (Martha)
> "I am keeping well and getting through each day." (Hilda)

These examples show that participants work with both conceptualisations of time at once and that they are rendered coherent by the context. The fact that people often mix metaphors in this way when describing personal experiences has been observed in a number of studies (see Gibbs, 2016 for a selection of relevant studies), as one metaphor only provides a partial picture of the phenomenon under discussion. Although the ways participants used moving time and moving ego metaphors related to their experiences of agency and helplessness, the two conceptualisations did not map neatly onto the two types of experience, largely because both conceptualisations could be used positively and negatively.

Public metaphors: Awareness and evaluation, acceptance, and rejection

Finally, we reflect on the extent to which participants were aware of metaphors that they themselves employed, and metaphors others used to refer to them or the situation. We explore their acceptance and rejection of metaphor, and by extension of the wider situation and their own place in society. Some participants explicitly evaluated metaphors, with participants weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of different metaphorical framings. We also found examples of outright rejection of some metaphors employed in the political arena to discuss the situation. Resistance to metaphor can be an empowering strategy for people who are at risk being adversely affected by the metaphors employed by those in power (see, for example, Wackers et al., 2021).

Interestingly, participants produced explicit evaluations of containment metaphors, which are the metaphors that Charteris-Black (2021) describes as being "coercive". Some talked about the idea of "cocooning", which they viewed as a positive reframing of the "lockdown" metaphor and other metaphors involving containment. They appear to have considered the various metaphors that are used in public discourse and have selected the ones that they believe to be the most beneficial to them. This appears to be a way of coping with the situation as it helps them to re-evaluate a situation that is outside of their control into something that is positive and comfortable. Interestingly, this contrasts with (Bailey et al., 2021) aforementioned findings, and underscores the presence of variation in people's responses to the different metaphors that are used to influence behavior.

For instance, Katherine explicitly states that she sees cocooning or bubbling as a positive thing, not just as it provides protection from coronavirus, but as protection from the negative impact of household isolation. She also contrasts the metaphorical idea of *cocooning* with the more literal idea of being *cooped up:*

> "I have felt cocooned through this isolation, and in a bit of a bubble, and protected from the outside, obviously I haven't been shopping, my son has helped out enormously, and also I have had quite a bit of success with home deliveries, so I haven't been out and had those frustrations, so that is a positive element of this cocooning, being in a bubble."
> "We previously mentioned the word cocooned didn't we? … In contrast, a word I have heard quite a bit, as I say in contrast is the word cooped up, cooped up, I have heard a few times. Not from me personally, I promise I haven't felt cooped up, and I don't know… I think I have said it before, I don't know if I can say I am self-isolating and I

> don't feel, generally feel, deep down that I am, I don't feel cooped up at all. Cocooned, yes, but in a nice gentle manner, so I am still quite reasonably content to remain cocooned."

Katherine also explicitly rejects the word *lockdown* itself: "The lockdown… I don't really like that word, but you can't seem to get away from it, and they seem to refer to it more these days, don't they, 'lockdown' rather than self-isolation."

This rejection of some metaphors and acceptance of others could reflect a desire for control. She refuses the public discourse about the situation, perhaps because of the "overt moral coercion" it creates (Charteris-Black, 2021). Furthermore, she seems to be trying to control her own situation by controlling her language, by replacing negative metaphors (*lockdown*, *cooped up*) with a more positive one (*cocooning*).

Stephen uses a containment metaphor that differs to those used in public discourse, such as "bubble", "cocoon", or "pod" (Charteris-Black, 2021), in the phrase "prisoners of fear". Here he is still drawing on the source domain of containment but seeks to limit the extent to which he is "contained". Trevor also comments on the language used in the media to describe "the race to get back to so-called normal". Likewise, Freda reflects on the idea of a "return to normal", commonly seen in public discourse as a positive thing, saying "that is a bit daunting, because it was a lonely normal anyway". Despite the prevalence of fighting and war metaphors in the public discourse, participants did not tend to use these in their interviews, but they did refer to the "frontline". It could be that participants did not comment on the prominent war metaphors because they were experiencing and reflecting on the household isolation on a personal level, and wars tend to be group activities carried out on a national level. However, we did see commentary on a lack of control nationally when Hilda referred to the track and trace system as a "weapon".

There were several other examples where participants displayed skepticism toward some of the metaphors that were prominent in public discourse. For example, as we saw above, Walter questions the accuracy of the term "lockdown": "we are not actually locked down into the house all the time", resisting large scale, government discourse metaphors around COVID-19. Perhaps most poignantly, Freda comments on how expressions such as "lockdown" and "being locked in" only apply to certain groups of people: "It is not true they are locked in, as the people that have the money to go to Spain and all these places on holiday, are not really the locked in ones. The true locked in ones are the poor people."

Edith frequently signals her metaphors, which also serves to reveal her attitude toward them, showing awareness of and perhaps even resistance to them (see italics for signaling):

> "Us oldies will be the last in the queue *as it were*."
> "They are *rather* up the creek without a paddle."
> "I feel *to some extent* my wings are clipped."

Martha employs a similar strategy by marking some of her metaphors, acknowledging that they are not to be taken literally:

> "So there is the two ends of the social distancing, of the spectrum *if you like* and there is everything in between *I suppose*."
> "The virus will have died *if you like, for want of a better expression*".

This final example especially highlights some resistance to the animation of the virus, as outlined in the previous section on metaphors that are directly related to agency.

In this section, we have seen that many participants were willing and able to challenge the metaphors used in the prevailing discourse and did not appear to be cowed by them. Rather, they talked explicitly about the extent to which they felt certain metaphors were appropriate and were willing to reject ones that they did not deem relevant, which demonstrates their desire to reclaim agency over the situation. It should be noted that the participants were highly educated and literate, which may explain some of their awareness of metaphor and their ability to question metaphors that they did not feel were appropriate. However, this still highlights the interaction between the metaphors the participants used and how they were feeling; metaphors can be used to help reframe a situation more positively or negatively, and positive or negative feelings can result in use of different metaphors at different times.

Conclusion

Although limited to a small number of participants, our metaphor analysis has provided insight into a range of ways in which older adults experienced and linguistically negotiated the period of household isolation. At first sight, our findings appear to suggest that the participants had adopted the dominant public metaphors of war and containment, but our qualitative analysis of the data revealed a much more nuanced picture. Although the participants did make use of metaphors related to war and fighting, they tended to direct them toward other targets, such as the government's "track and trace" system, or were covertly critical of their use. Other metaphors appeared to be more useful for describing their experiences. The first set of metaphors based around physical force, movement, and space, as well as metaphorical construals of time, appeared to be used by participants to negotiate their sense of agency. They further addressed their need for control through the use of comforting metaphors involving patterns and structure. The use of these metaphors appears to have served as a reflective method for coping. Participants made nuanced use of metaphor relating time and space, and as such their use of moving time vs. moving ego metaphors did not map neatly on their feelings regarding

the lack or presence of agency. The various ways in which they use metaphor to talk about their experience of time during the household isolation provided insights into their evolving emotions. We also saw clear cases of participants questioning or rejecting metaphors, reflecting a desire to reclaim agency. Our findings reveal how metaphors that are prevalent in public discourses are appropriated selectively and are often challenged by those at whom they are targeted. Metaphor analysis offers a useful framework for reflecting on the lived experience of people experiencing household isolation.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because it would be a violation of the terms of agreement that the participants consented to. It has been agreed that the transcripts will be destroyed on the completion of analysis and publication and dissemination of results. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to joanne.brooke@bcu.ac.uk.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University Research Ethics Committee, Birmingham City University. The Ethics Committee waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation.

Author contributions

JB was responsible for the original data collection as part of a broader study investigating the experiences of older adults during household isolation. JB and MC contributed expertise on qualitative psycho-social research to the design of this study. JL contributed expertise on metaphor analysis to the design of the study and responsible for data visualization. EW and SB analyzed the data under the supervision of JL. EW, SB, and JL interpreted the data. All authors wrote sections of the first manuscript and contributed to reviewing and editing the final manuscript.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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