

Project 1 | Assignment 4

Our final reading is a scholarly essay written by a team of psychologists who analyze the functioning of metaphors that characterize responses to social problems in terms of war. So ubiquitous are war metaphors in response to national challenges that it is difficult to imagine alternative comparisons. Although war metaphors have been critiqued as misleading, ineffective, and predictable, they continue to circulate freely and to be received by most citizens without question.

Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau document a long and varied tradition of scholarship on the subject, and judiciously account for both positive and negative effects of the metaphor. They even go so far as to recommend what they refer to as “empirically grounded guidelines for effectively employing war metaphors in public discourse,” sketching out the conditions under which the metaphor tends to work well. Without explicitly saying so, the authors seem to suggest that using the metaphor of war is a successful persuasive technique since it intersects with deeply-held assumptions about how best to grapple with serious and overwhelming difficulties: to fight back, to counter attack, to achieve victory of an enemy. As we will see, this means that the metaphor of war operates at the level of *ideology*: a community’s widely-accepted assumptions about what exists, what is good, and what is possible in the world, often assumptions that guide how we make decisions for ourselves and treat others.

For our purposes, one of the most interesting parts of their article focuses on the emotional effects that war metaphors create. We have touched a bit on how the metaphor provokes fear, certainly one of the most salient responses since we know that phenomena such as panic and xenophobia depend on its manufacture, and that a sense of personal threat stimulates predictable behavioral reactions. Clearly, the area of emotion and human feeling are key aspects in describing and evaluating the use of public metaphors. But Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau offer us a surprisingly brief discussion of this.

How might you add to their brief discussion? What areas regarding emotional response do you believe deserve attention? In addition to fear, which emotions associated with the public use of the war metaphor in relation to COVID-19 should be described and analyzed? You are welcome to draw your evidence from your own life, and from what you’ve observed or come to understand about others’ lives.