Metaphor in intergroup relations

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Abstract

Belonging to groups and relating to other groups are central parts of our lives, but they confront us with abstract ideas (e.g., identity and power) and nebulous feelings. To make sense of it all, people rely on conceptual metaphors: cognitive tools that ground abstractions in dissimilar, more concrete ideas that are easier to grasp. We review some common metaphors that people use in intergroup contexts—metaphors that draw on knowledge of such familiar experiences as physical cleansing and warmth sensations. We review evidence that these metaphors are not mere figures of speech, but have a systematic and practically important influence on intergroup attitudes and behavior. Most of this work shows that reliance on metaphor contributes to prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination, sometimes without the person’s awareness. Yet we consider the hopeful possibility that citizens, politicians, and researchers can harness the power of metaphor to promote intergroup harmony and peace.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Intergroup relations are dauntingly complex and difficult to understand. Many urgent questions lack straightforward answers: Is it moral to redistribute wealth among unequal groups? Is it practical for the United States to take in refugees—and if so, how many? Are undocumented immigrants hurting the economy? Why do police disproportionately fatally injure Black men? People have strong feelings about particular groups, how groups should interact, and how society should be organized; but they are often at a loss to explain precisely why.

To make sense of it all, people regularly reach for metaphors rooted in concrete concepts that are easier to grasp. Metaphors help people understand abstract concepts like power, morality, diversity, and aggression, and they build on commonplace knowledge about a wide range of familiar experiences, including vehicle driving, bodily movements, plants, and machinery. They are communicated in everyday conversation, news reports, campaign speeches, school textbooks, and other outlets. For example, one hears about groups “rising up,” intergroup conflict “reaching a boiling point,” a sense of “core” identity, and activists “fighting the battle” for civil rights.

Metaphors may aid understanding, but they are not guaranteed to produce accurate perceptions or useful inferences about the appropriate course of action. As we discuss shortly, metaphors direct attention to select elements of a stimulus and push others to the periphery of awareness. When people habitually rely on a metaphor to reason and make judgments, they may come to believe that it depicts what something really is. They take their metaphor-based
beliefs to be literal, straightforward reflections of social reality. In this way, metaphor use can breed persistent misconceptions and guide policies that exacerbate prejudice and intergroup conflict.

These considerations suggest that it is both theoretically and practically important to identify the metaphors that shape people’s intergroup attitudes. At a theoretical level, this would help elucidate the cognitive mechanisms underlying prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. At a practical level, interventions might be designed to relax reliance on certain metaphors, or replace them with more socially constructive alternatives, with the goal of improving intergroup relations.

This article starts to detail such an account. Our presentation is necessarily incomplete. People rely on numerous metaphors to represent intergroup relations, and we cannot consider them all. Instead, we focus on some metaphors that researchers are beginning to investigate experimentally. We review evidence that metaphoric thinking has systematic effects on intergroup emotions and attitudes. Most of this work implicates metaphors in negative biases and stereotyping, but we conclude on a hopeful note by considering metaphor’s potential to promote peace.

We begin with Conceptual Metaphor Theory as an organizing framework. It posits that metaphor, traditionally dismissed as a mere figure of speech, is a cognitive tool that people can use to understand abstractions in terms of superficially dissimilar, more concrete concepts (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Some terminology is useful: A target is a concept that is abstract, complex, or otherwise difficult to represent in its own terms. In the intergroup domain, some important targets are identity, belonging, fairness, power, and harmony. A source is a relatively more concrete concept used to understand a target. Metaphor supports understanding by creating a mapping—a set of systematic associations between features of the target and analogous features of the source. The mapping is partial, meaning that select features of the target are made salient while other features are downplayed or inhibited. When a mapping is accessible, people can draw on their source knowledge as a "template" for representing and reasoning about the target, even though the two concepts are superficially unrelated.

To illustrate these terms, consider the phrase “a flood of immigrants is coming into our country." In this metaphor, immigration is the target, flood is the source, and the mapping between them highlights and downplays select target features. People know, for example, that floods are typically hard to control, damaging, and strike abruptly without concern for victims’ well-being. The flood metaphor transfers knowledge, portraying immigrants as overwhelming the host country’s government, arriving suddenly in excessive numbers, and threatening to dilute or drown out the local identity. Metaphors also guide reasoning about the appropriate course of action. For example, if immigrants are a flood, then it seems prudent to create a barrier to block their flow—perhaps Donald Trump’s “great, great wall on our southern border,” which won’t allow people to “pour into our country” (Lozano-Reich, 2016; Trump, 2016).

A metaphor’s source often refers to bodily experiences, such as walking, eating, and pain sensations. How can we understand metaphors’ significance in the context of research on embodied cognition (e.g., Gibbs, 2006; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005)? First, it is important to recognize common ground: Metaphor studies support the notion that meanings people give to abstract social concepts are bound up with sensory, motor, and physiological interactions with the physical environment (Johnson, 1987). What makes metaphor unique is that it transfers the schematic knowledge of a bodily source to represent analogous elements of the target. For example, people can apply a well-learned script for goal-directed walking to represent a relationship's “starting point” (beginning), “destination” (purpose), and “obstacles” (difficulties). It is not necessary, therefore, for a metaphor’s source to be embodied; it may instead refer to schematic knowledge of a social event or activity, such as building construction, courtroom proceedings, or the rules of competitive sports.

Influential perspectives on embodied cognition, by contrast, tend to emphasize processes that take place "within," rather than “between” concepts. For example, Barsalou’s (1999) perceptual symbols systems posits that concepts contain representations of bodily states that customarily occur during interactions with relevant stimuli and contexts. As a result, thinking about these concepts simulates, or reactivates, associated bodily states. For example, thinking about bowling can simulate a tactile representation of a bowling ball’s smooth surface, even if you’re not currently holding one. However interesting, this simulation process is unlike metaphor use in that you’re not applying schematic knowledge of smooth surfaces to grasp the abstract concept of bowling. These are theoretical points, but they have very real
consequences. Metaphor’s unique power to map dissimilar concepts is what makes it both an attractive tool for understanding and a potential source of harmful bias.

The basic tenets of Conceptual Metaphor Theory are supported in a large body of experimental evidence. In numerous studies conducted across the globe, researchers have shown that activated metaphors systematically influence how people make sense of their social world (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010; Landau, Meier, & Robinson, 2014). Even subtle cues can bring metaphors to mind, producing source-consistent effects on person perception (Meier, Scholer, & Fincher-Kiefer, 2014), memory (Crawford, 2014), decision making (Lee & Schwarz, 2014), and attitude change (Ottati & Renstrom, 2010), to name just a few processes studied. One such cue is exposure to metaphoric language or imagery in public discourse, whether that be in the form of an online news story, advertisement, or corporate logo (Landau & Keefer, 2014).

We start to examine what this research reveals about metaphor’s role in intergroup phenomena. We organize our review around some prominent source concepts, considering some familiar ideas that people apply to give form to their group-relevant attitudes and behaviors.

2 | VERTICALITY

One of the most basic (i.e., conventional, culturally widespread) metaphors maps positive and negative valence onto vertical space: Up is good, powerful, morally righteous, and healthy; down is bad, powerless, and disgraceful (Schnall, 2014). This metaphor informs several social-cognitive processes. For example, people are quicker to react to positive (negative) words and images when they are presented high (low) on a computer screen (Damjanovic & Santiago, 2016; Meier & Robinson, 2004). They show metaphor-consistent biases in memory, remembering positive (negative) images as appearing higher (lower) than they actually appeared (Crawford, Margolies, Drake, & Murphy, 2006). And they associate God, divinity, and morality with up and sinful or immoral stimuli with down (Frimer & Sinclair, 2016; Meier, Hauser, Robinson, Friesen & Schjeldahl, 2007; Meier, Sellbom & Wygant, 2007).

In the intergroup context, studies implicate this metaphor in judgments of groups and their members. For example, people are quicker to identify powerful (powerless) groups presented at high (low) positions (Lu et al., 2015; Schubert, 2005; Zanolie et al., 2012), and they perceive targets who appear high up to be more powerful (Meier, Hauser, et al., 2007). When people viewed an organizational hierarchy diagram with a long vertical line between managers and employees, they perceived managers as more dominant and higher in status; a long horizontal line, in contrast, did not have this effect (Giessner & Schubert, 2007). Power judgments reciprocally influence verticality perceptions: Participants told about a powerful (vs. weak) manager drew that manager higher up on a workplace diagram. Other studies show that individuals high in interpersonal dominance are particularly attuned to vertical space (Moeller, Robinson, & Zabelina, 2008; Robinson, Zabelina, Ode, & Moeller, 2008).

Verticality metaphors are expressed in common expressions linking status to social ladders. Phrases like moving up, hitting a glass ceiling, and bottom rung are common not only in everyday talk but also scholarly discourse in social psychology (e.g., Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013). This metaphor is expressed in experimental procedures used to capture respondents’ intuitions about social class. Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, and Ickovics (2000) measured subjective socioeconomic status—how people perceive their own class status—by having participants place themselves on a picture of a ladder. Those who placed themselves high atop the ladder had better health, less negative affect, less chronic stress, and more perceived personal control than those who saw themselves on lower rungs. Similar measures predict a wide swath of theoretically relevant variables (Kraus et al., 2013). This predictive validity shows that verticality metaphors are not mere figures of speech, but meaningfully capture people’s conceptions of social class.

Like the social ladder, social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) relies explicitly on verticality metaphors. Consider items like: “It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and others are at the bottom,” and “Groups at the bottom should not have to stay in their place” (Ho et al., 2015; emphasis added). In a closer look at this metaphor’s significance, we (White & Landau, 2016) found that socially dominant individuals prefer vertical
representations of groups (e.g., visual hierarchies) to alternative representations (e.g., networks). They also derogate powerless groups when those groups are depicted as "low" in society (using a vertical metaphor), but not when the same groups are depicted as "marginalized" (using a center vs. periphery metaphor).

3 | ORGANISM

Beginning with the Ancient Greeks, society is regularly understood metaphorically as a biological organism (Levine, 1995). This metaphor highlights the notion that society evolves and matures like a plant or animal species. Social Darwinism is based on this metaphor, as it argues that societies, nations, classes, and ethnicities are akin to species that are subject to natural selection (Claeys, 2000; Fracchia & Lewontin, 1999). Let's see how this metaphor has been applied to specific groups and then to society as a whole.

3.1 | Groups are organisms

The organism metaphor has been used to justify prejudice and inequality (Fracchia & Lewontin, 1999, 2005; Perry et al., 2014). If certain groups of people are worse off in society, the metaphor implies, it is not because of exploitation or discrimination—it is because these groups are not the fit organisms. In biology, fitness refers to the ability of species to survive and reproduce; metaphorically, groups’ "fitness" has been variously tied to their moral character, intelligence, skill, or productivity in a capitalist marketplace. It should then be no surprise that eugenicists' hierarchies of the fitness of races mirrored the dominant prejudices of the time (Leonard, 2005).

Theorists like Herbert Spencer and Thomas Malthus believed that this "evolution" represented progress (Fracchia & Lewontin, 1999). This implies that helping those who are disadvantaged in society is morally wrong and harmful for the human species, because it ensures that those groups who are unfit live on in society. Darwin himself warned of the "degeneration of a domestic race," because the least fit members of society (e.g., the poor and racial minorities) bred so much, while the more virtuous and fit people start families later in life (Claeys, 2000). This supports strict laissez-faire policies, because government intervention represents a dangerous artificial selection from, in Spencer’s words, "political meddlers" who are "breaking the fundamental law of social life," by which he means natural selection (Stewart, 2011, p. 395; see also Leonard, 2005, 2009).

The evolution metaphor derived from the general groups are organisms metaphor justifies the stereotypes, prejudices, and inequities in society because it paints disadvantaged groups as socially unfit people who do not contribute to human flourishing. Thus, they do not deserve help, because this would only derail the "natural progress" of "social evolution." While this metaphor has decreased in popularity since the end of World War II, it is likely people still implicitly rely on it when thinking about disadvantaged groups in society.

3.2 | Society is an organism

The metaphor society is an organism implies that society can fall ill from group influence. In the early 1900s, public discourse likened people with mental disabilities or those with "poor character" to harmful microbes in the "body" of society (O’Brien, 1999), while Jewish and Japanese people in the United States and Germany have been likened to plagues, cancers, viruses, and tumors that harm the metaphoric national body (O’Brien, 2010). In a detailed analysis of national discourse, O’Brien (2003) showed that immigrant groups were often explicitly likened to harmful contaminants that invaded society’s body and made it sick or bloated. For instance, assimilation was often described as "digestion" and "absorption." This metaphor justifies prejudice as an expression of the national immune system that neutralizes contaminating pollutants.

This metaphor continues to influence Americans’ immigration attitudes. Landau, Sullivan, and Greenberg (2009) led one group of participants to be concerned about the invasion of airborne bacteria into their own bodies. In a
separate manipulation, participants read either metaphoric expressions comparing America to a body (e.g., “growth spurt”) or literal paraphrases (e.g., “period of innovation”).

As predicted, heightening participants’ concerns with bodily contamination increased aversion to immigration if they were additionally primed to view their country as a body. In contrast, contamination threat, although generally aversive, did not influence immigration attitudes when the nation was framed without a metaphor. For those participants in the non-metaphoric framing condition, there was no meaningful relation between protecting their own body from foreign elements and the abstract issue of immigration. But when a bodily-metaphoric framing led some participants to map those concepts, they transferred their bodily contamination concerns to make immigration judgments.

4 | CLEANLINESS

Morality is an abstract concept, and people struggle to articulate why they believe something is moral or immoral despite having strong intuitions (Haidt, 2001). Using metaphor, people conceptualize morality in terms of experiences with physical dirt, cleanliness, and contamination, among other sources.

Disgust and avoidance of dirty stimuli have an evolutionary benefit of protecting people from dangerous pathogens. But people feel disgust in response to people, actions, and ideas that are not physically dirty or contaminating. This is because they construe cleanliness in broader, more figurative terms than those suggested by the evolutionary perspective. In this construal, something is “dirty” if it is outside of, or otherwise threatens, a system of order (Douglas, 1966). Because norms, values, and other societal constructs act as systems of moral order, people are disgusted by social stimuli that threaten to undermine those constructs.

Supporting this theorizing is evidence that experiences with physical dirt and moral judgments affect each other in metaphor-consistent ways (Zhong & House, 2014). For example, recalling one’s own unethical acts increases desire to physically cleanse (Lee & Schwarz, 2010), and increasing people’s perceptions of their own physical cleanliness increased ratings of their personal moral character (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006).

Many of the prejudices social psychologists study are toward groups perceived to violate social norms, values, and morals (Crandall, Ferguson, & Bahns, 2013); cleanliness concepts play a significant role in these prejudices (Hodson & Dhont, 2015). Cottrell and Neuberg (2005) demonstrate that specific prejudicial emotions felt toward a group map onto the perceived threat that the group poses. They use metaphorical language of dirt and messiness to argue that people feel disgust toward groups that represent “contamination” to the in-group, whether it is endangering the physical health or the values of the group. They measured specific emotional reactions (e.g., anger and pity) to various groups (e.g., Mexican-Americans and Native Americans) and found that gay men had the highest disgust ratings, the highest perceived threat to health, and second highest perceived threat to values.

Other studies of homophobia reveal similar effects. Participants induced to dwell on a disgusting event showed increased implicit bias against gays and lesbians, whereas those induced to feel anger did not show these effects (Dasgupta, DeSteno, Williams, & Hunsinger, 2009); individuals chronically sensitive to feeling disgust hold negative implicit associations with gays and lesbians relative to heterosexuals (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009); people who believed gays and lesbians “directly oppose the values of people like me” and “advocate values that are morally inferior” felt more disgust toward them, which predicted disagreement with gay rights (Cottrell, Richards, & Nichols, 2010).

Disgust also contributes to ethnic and racial prejudice by means of metaphor. Interpersonal disgust sensitivity (e.g., not wanting to sit in a seat that’s still warm from a stranger) predicts prejudice towards immigrants, foreign ethnic groups, and deviant low-status groups (Hodson & Costello, 2007). This was mediated by right wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996), a scale that uses metaphorical language about pathogens to describe deviant groups—for example: “Our country will be destroyed someday if we do not smash the perversions eating away at our moral fiber and traditional beliefs” (emphasis added). People see these deviant groups in metaphorical terms as dirty pathogens that will contaminate and infect the cleanliness of “our” value systems.
Hodson et al. (2013) developed an “intergroup disgust sensitivity scale” that taps into these metaphoric associations (e.g., “After interacting with another ethnic group, I typically desire more contact with my own ethnic group to ‘undo’ any ill effects from intergroup contact,” p. 199). Ethnic groups dirty up one’s life space, and interacting with the ingroup cleanses it. People who score higher on this scale also report more germ aversion, higher sensitivity to feeling disgust, and greater prejudice against a wide variety of social groups that represent deviations from traditional American values and morals (e.g., Muslims, foreigners, homosexuals, immigrants, Blacks, poor people, and drug users).

In another study on immigration attitudes (Faulkner, Schaller, Park, & Duncan, 2004), participants learned about a (hypothetical) African outgroup “Krasneeans” trying to immigrate to the participants’ country. Individual differences in perceived vulnerability to disease (e.g., “I dislike wearing used clothes because you don’t know what the past person who wore it was like”) predicted beliefs that this group should not be allowed to immigrate and perceptions of Krasneeans as less friendly, likable, and trustworthy. Variations in perceived disease vulnerability also correlate with anti-fat and anti-elderly prejudices (Duncan & Schaller, 2009; Park, Schaller, & Crandall, 2007).

5 | ANIMALS

Prejudice is often paired with dehumanization—viewing outgroups as less than fully human and therefore ineligible for the care and respect normally accorded to fellow humans. Worldwide, animal metaphors pervade representations of outgroups in language, images, and cultural symbols (Haslam, Loughnan, & Sun, 2011). For example: During World War II, Nazi propaganda portrayed European Jews as disease-carrying rats, while the Japanese portrayed Americans as bloodthirsty eagles mauling innocent Japanese civilians; during the 1970s and 1980s, The Black Panther newspaper depicted police and other authority figures as anthropomorphic swine; in 2015, Ben Carson, then a leading presidential candidate, compared refugees seeking entrance to the U.S. to “a rabid dog running around your neighborhood” (McCaskill, 2015). Across cultures men talk about women using a vocabulary borrowed from ornithology: as chicks, birds, geese, and hens who can be flighty, broody, or feather-brained (not to mention bunnies, kittens, and so forth; Kövecses, 2005).

Maass, Suiitner, and Arcuri (2014) propose some reasons why animal metaphors exert such a hold on people’s imagination. For one, they make it easier to view outgroup members as homogenous. Most people have simple, stereotyped conceptions of animal species. We can sum up the disposition of all sharks, for instance, with a few adjectives. Equating a social category to an animal species—like “lawyers are sharks”—makes members of that category seem “all alike.” Also, animal metaphors provide vivid labels that communicate negative feelings in stark, compact, and memorable terms. Certain critters elicit visceral aversion, and animal metaphors transfer this aversion to social groups, intensifying group attitudes. Accordingly, describing groups as animals (versus a literal description) led perceivers to attribute more stereotypic traits to group members (Maass et al., 2014). Related studies show that different dehumanizing metaphors have specific effects on group-based trait attributions. In one study (Loughnan, Haslam, & Kashima, 2009), participants led to believe that a novel group was like an animal viewed members of that group as low in traits that distinguish humans from animals (e.g., humble and rude); but when a group was described as robotic, participants viewed its members as low in traits that distinguish humans from inanimate objects (e.g., friendly and aggressive).

Animal metaphors also enable prejudice and discrimination. Once outgroup members have been reduced to animals who do not deserve moral consideration, people—including children—report greater prejudice toward outgroups (Costello & Hodson, 2014), and perpetrators feel less inhibited about harming them (Staub, 1989). After all, it is easier to hurt or kill rats, bugs, and monkeys than fellow human beings. Historical analyses show that animal metaphors in media representations and political rhetoric—such as comparisons of Tutsies to cockroaches infesting Rwandan society—played a decisive role in fomenting violence and exclusion of the targeted group from society (Capozza & Volpato, 2004; Kellow & Steeves, 1998; Steuter & Wills, 2010). Converging experimental evidence reveals that people were more likely to administer a higher intensity of shock to punish people described in animal
terms (e.g., “They are an animalistic, rotten bunch”) than people described in human or neutral terms (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975).

Furthermore, animal metaphors assuage people’s worry over past discrimination. We rarely second-guess our aversive reaction to some animals (e.g., one might whack an icky spider with a newspaper without compunction). By regarding outgroup members as subhuman and therefore less deserving of moral consideration, people can avoid feeling guilty for causing that group undeserved harm. Supporting studies show that people made to feel collectively responsible for their ingroup’s mass killing of an outgroup viewed members of that outgroup as less human (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006).

War enemies are not the only outgroups that are dehumanized to justify outgroup harm. White Americans have historically equated Black Americans to monkeys and apes. Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, and Jackson (2008) proposed that, even if White Americans are not consciously aware of this association, they have learned it from their surrounding culture. In one study, White Americans were more likely to hold the opinion that violence against a Black target was justified if they had been primed with ape-related words beneath their conscious awareness.

The two consequences of animal metaphors just discussed can combine to create a vicious cycle of intergroup conflict: Dehumanization facilitates negative treatment of outgroup members that is justified by further dehumanizing the victims.

It is worth noting that although animal metaphors are generally perceived as being offensive and dehumanizing, this is not always the case. Some animals (e.g., owls) and contexts (e.g., intragroup and joking tone) allow these metaphors to be perceived as inoffensive and even endearing (Haslam et al., 2011).

Other dehumanizing metaphors compare outgroup members to inanimate objects instead of animals. As such, they express a broader tendency to objectify—to think about and treat an individual more like an object or a commodity than a person. For example, observers may reduce workers to “cogs” in a corporate machine (Haslam, 2006). Mapping human onto object serves to deny that outgroup members possess the psychological characteristics that make them fully human, such as a unique point of view and a complex emotional life.

### 6 LIGHT AND DARK

Humans are diurnal creatures who function effectively in daylight but ineffectively at nighttime (Tolaas, 1991). Early in development, we learn that brightness helps us to navigate our surroundings and connect with supportive relationship partners. Eventually, we apply light and dark concepts to represent positive and negative aspects of the social world, respectively. Language is rife with phrases like bright days, dark outlook, and shady business deal. The same metaphor is expressed in religious imagery and popular media portrayals of heroes and villains (Meier et al., 2014).

The light metaphor causally influences group attitudes. Compared to sports teams in lighter uniforms, teams in darker uniforms are perceived to be more malevolent, and they are more likely to be called by game officials for penalties (Frank & Gilovich, 1988).

It comes as no surprise that this metaphor figures in racial prejudice. We know that implicit evaluations of dark-skinned individuals are often negative (Fazio & Olson, 2003), sometimes even among African Americans (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). People are faster to recognize stereotypical Caucasian names and faces when they are paired with positive words and stereotypical African-American names and faces when they are paired with negative words (Greenwald et al., 1998). Although such evaluations have a host of causes (e.g., exposure to media portrayals), they stem in part from a metaphoric association between brightness and valence. In one study, the effect just mentioned was attenuated after controlling for people’s tendency to associate the colors white and black with positive and negative valence, respectively (Smith-McLallen, Johnson, Dovidio, & Pearson, 2006). In a related study, Ronquillo et al. (2007) examined activation in the amygdala, an area of the brain that activates when people are exposed to potential threats. Participants had greater amygdala activation when shown pictures of darker versus lighter skinned Caucasians, demonstrating a neurological connection between affect and brightness.
The most widely used operationalization of prejudice—the “feeling thermometer” (Nelson, 2008)—operates on a metaphor that compares liking to physical warmth and disliking to coldness. Some versions wear the temperature metaphor on their sleeve, presenting respondents with a picture of a thermometer complete with degree markings (Alwin, 1997). This is no mere abstraction concocted by researchers: Most people find it intuitive to report feeling warm or cold toward a group, and their responses predict a wide range of intergroup behaviors (Talaska, Fiske, & Chaiken, 2008).

The temperature metaphor informs theory as well as measurement. According to the Stereotype Content Model, people evaluate groups along two primary dimensions (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). One is status: Is a group perceived as relatively powerful and competent in society? The other is warmth: Groups seen as cooperative and likeable are warm; those seen as competitive and harmful are cold. Relevant scales reproduce the temperature metaphor by asking respondents to rate groups’ “warmth.” These evaluations predict specific emotional responses. For example, groups that are stereotyped as warm but incompetent (e.g., the elderly) elicit pity and sympathy, whereas groups perceived as low in warmth but high in competence (e.g., the rich) elicit envy and jealousy.

Further evidence for the temperature metaphor’s significance comes from studies showing that sensations of physical warmth affect intergroup attitudes in a metaphor-consistent manner. Participants holding a warm (vs. cold) object displayed less implicit bias against African-Americans (Breines, 2012). Warmth sensations also led participants to make more situational attributions for outgroup members’ negative behavior, suggesting that metaphor shapes cognitive outcomes of prejudice as well as implicit evaluations.

Competitive games have winners and losers. They are zero-sum—if one player wins, the other necessarily loses. When the Miami Heat won Game 7 of the 2013 NBA Finals, it necessarily meant the San Antonio Spurs lost; and when Garry Kasparov won one of the best chess games ever played, it necessarily meant Veselin Topalov was the loser.

People perceive intergroup competition as zero-sum (Jackman, 1994), making games seem like an apt metaphor for intergroup relations more generally. Perceived decreases in anti-Black bias predict perceived increases of anti-White bias in society, but only for Whites (Norton & Sommers, 2011). This effect is most pronounced for Whites who endorse social inequality, has been demonstrated with novel groups, and has been shown to apply to consequential policies like affirmative action (Eibach & Keegan, 2006). Zero-sum beliefs about intergroup relations predict greater support for inequality, negative attitudes toward immigration, and various ethnic prejudices (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001). While sometimes groups may be literally competing over scarce resources, more often groups pose symbolic threats (that are not zero-sum) to the values or social identities of other groups (Mukherjee, Molina, & Adams, 2012, 2013).

One of the most prominent metaphors in contemporary intergroup discourse is that of the race card (Lee & Morin, 2009). This is used in response to when historically disadvantaged groups in society claim that they have been the victims of prejudice and discrimination. For instance, when President Barack Obama suggested that some of the criticism levied against him as president is due to his race, conservatives were quick to claim that Obama was simply playing the race card (Lucas, 2015).

Saying that someone is “playing the race card” is a way to discredit their claim of being victims of discrimination as not a genuine attempt to address inequality, but instead a cynical ploy to capitalize on the widespread anti-racist norms for the so-called victim’s own personal gain. The card metaphor “connotes a strategic gambit that one deploys to win a game, rather than an honest and organic attempt to advance discussion” (Schraub, 2016, p. 285, emphasis added). If you are playing a game against someone and they deploy a cheap, unfair, and illegitimate tactic, you do not need to take their move seriously. You can simply claim that it is cheating. There is no reason to argue about
why someone would collect $500 for passing “Go” in Monopoly—players are supposed to take $200 and those are simply the rules. Therefore, a key mapping to this metaphor is that one’s claim that they were victims of prejudice or discrimination is perceived as wholesale illegitimate before ever examining the evidence the victim presents (Schraub, 2016). Few people have the requisite knowledge to fully understand a society’s racial history, so the race card becomes a useful source concept for people to discredit claims of racism.

Framing intergroup relations as competitive games implies that there is a necessary tension between groups, which may exacerbate prejudices. This may be a problem for social psychologists when they rely on creating in-lab analogues for real-world intergroup phenomena. For example, they often involve participants in games such as the ultimatum game or the prisoner’s dilemma (e.g., Baxter, 1973; Cederblom & Diers, 1970; Eibach & Keegan, 2006; Heider & Skowronski, 2007; Kubota, Li, Bar-David, Banaji, & Phelps, 2013; Silvestre, Sarlet, Huart, & Dardenne, 2016; Sibley, Senn, & Epanchin, 1968). It is possible that explicitly instructing participants to play “games” may prime a competitive mentality that could exacerbate intergroup prejudices; however, if people chronically perceive intergroup relations as competitions, perhaps games are intuitive analogues.

9 | METAPHORS FOR PREJUDICE REDUCTION

The theory and research reviewed thus far points to metaphor as a significant source of prejudice and intergroup conflict. Does this mean that, to reduce prejudice, we should avoid metaphors altogether? Ultimately, this may be an impossible goal. Metaphor is central to human cognition, and it enables people to understand and communicate about society. A more reasonable goal is to harness metaphors for prosocial uses.

One such strategy is to use metaphor to gain a more vivid, workable understanding of diversity, an otherwise nebulous notion. Groups in a society can be seen as a fruit salad, mosaic, or tapestry, where all the component parts keep their distinct qualities but complement one another. These metaphors downplay the competitiveness found in the game metaphor. We recently found that people who value diversity like these metaphors and believe they capture how diversity works in America (Hakim, Landau, & White, 2016). We urge researchers to be creative in challenging the pervasive metaphors that we take for granted—such that intergroup relations are competitive games—and investigate how replacing them with more prosocial metaphors could reduce prejudice and increase intergroup harmony.

Metaphors can also help people appreciate historical realities. Consider how Coates (2014) discusses the United States’ collective attitude toward the long history of the oppression of Black people in the United States: “Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising, ’Never again.’ But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear” (emphases added). Coates relies on the metaphor that society is a ledger to make this point: The White exploitation of Black lives has created a debt. An important mapping in this metaphor is that, although Whites have promised not to create any more debt by engaging in any more exploitation, debt does not simply disappear once one stops spending. One must eventually pay the debt back. Researchers might leverage this metaphor to promote positive intergroup behaviors.

This possibility connects with the notion of collective guilt, which people experience when they perceive their group as responsible for unjustly harming another group, even if they were personally not present or directly involved with the harm (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2014). When people feel collective guilt, they are more likely to feel and behave positively toward the harmed outgroup members (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2014; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). For example, a field experiment by Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, and Manstead (1998) found that inducing collective guilt about Dutch colonial history led Dutch participants to support more reparations for Indonesia.

Nevertheless, collective guilt is a difficult emotion to evoke in people, who use several strategies to avoid this aversive feeling (e.g., denying group responsibility and distancing oneself from their group’s harm doing). Framing society as a ledger frames complex intergroup relations in a concrete, simple way: If you owe someone a debt, you
should feel guilty and even the ledger. Future research should examine whether framing intergroup harm as a debt increases support for reparations.

Another strategy is to “repurpose” metaphors that normally exacerbate intergroup hostilities to reduce them. For example, we discussed how seeing certain groups as dirt or disease is linked to seeing groups as immoral and norm violators. But there is also an egalitarian, anti-prejudice norm in contemporary United States (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), which means prejudice itself can be seen as physical grime or pollution. In May of 2016, Barack Obama signed a bill into law removing words like “Negro,” “Oriental,” and “Eskimo” from all Federal laws. The Root covered this story with the headline that says these words will be “scrubbed from all federal laws” (Helm, 2016, emphasis added), and the author relates this to how Confederate symbols are being “swept into the dustbin of history.” Similarly, David Petraeus, former U.S. general and CIA director, wrote of Donald Trump's proposal to ban all Muslims from entering the country: “[These ideas] are toxic, and, indeed, non-biodegradable—a kind of poison that, once released into our body politic, is not easily expunged” (Petraeus, 2016, emphasis added). In each of these examples, a message is prompting observers to apply a familiar schema for dirt and cleanliness to construe intergroup relations, but in a way that conduces toward peace.

10 | CONCLUSION

Intergroup relations are difficult to understand with complete certainty or great detail. Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, we proposed that, to represent and reason about intergroup relations, people routinely use metaphors that map the structure of group-relevant concepts (e.g., power) onto schematic knowledge of familiar concrete concepts, despite their surface-level differences. We reviewed several lines of research demonstrating metaphoric influences on a range of intergroup outcomes. Our review is not a comprehensive list or typology of metaphors in intergroup relations; instead, we hope that this review convinces those that research prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, intergroup relations, and social issues to appreciate metaphor’s significance in language, thought, and other cultural symbol systems by which people everywhere grapple with group life.

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