

Metaphoring the police: It's all about the right choice of word

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A well-chosen metaphor does wonders to explain concepts, to persuade and to ensure buy-in into any given matter. So says Paul Thibodeau of Oberlin College in the US, lead author of an article in Springer's journal *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* on the use of metaphors as a form of explanation. Thibodeau and his colleagues took note of how readers responded to the use of the more protective concept of "guardian" rather than the more militant word "warrior" to describe the police in President Barack Obama's 2015 task force report. It used these contrasting metaphors to emphasize how modern-day law enforcement officials should go about building trust and ensuring greater legitimacy.

Metaphors are part of everyday language. They help people think about complex, abstract, or novel ideas in terms of more familiar and often simpler concepts that people already understand. Yet relatively little experimental research has been done to examine whether and how [metaphors](#) are used and understood in everyday conversation.

Thibodeau's team therefore devised three experiments using the task force report as a basis.

In one, [participants](#) were asked about the association that first comes to mind on seeing the words "guardian" and "warrior." Their associations were found to differ depending on whether they had previously answered questions about [law enforcement](#). Both words elicited positive associations in a neutral context; "warrior" took on a more negative meaning for participants who had just been asked questions about law enforcement. As a result, it showed that a word's meaning depends on

the context in which it is used.

In this study, participants were also asked which of the two metaphors they thought described [police](#) officers more accurately. Interestingly, the participants were almost evenly split in this judgment, which went hand in hand with their beliefs about policing and the [criminal justice](#) system. Participants who saw the police as "guardians" for instance felt the [justice system](#) was more fair and effective than those who considered them to be "warriors."

The second and third studies investigated how metaphors facilitate explanation. The researchers found that when the police were metaphorically described as "guardians," people expressed a more positive view of law enforcement and the criminal justice system than when the police were metaphorically described as "warriors." When the experiment was designed so that people saw these same words—guardian and warrior—but not as metaphors for police, the words did not influence participants' attitudes toward law enforcement. This suggests that a metaphor has to appear in the context of the subject being explained to exert a causal influence on those receiving the message.

Thibodeau says that the choice of the "guardian" metaphor in the Obama task force's report worked well because it changed participants' regard for the nature and role of law enforcement.

"Recent violent clashes between law enforcement and civilians have generated a national conversation about the role of [police officers](#) in our communities. Our research suggests that we need to pay careful attention to the metaphors we use to support our explanations," Thibodeau adds.

"Metaphors can efficiently encapsulate and communicate an array of structured attitudes and beliefs, and can guide people to think about a

target domain in new ways," says Thibodeau.

More information: Paul H. Thibodeau et al, The metaphor police: A case study of the role of metaphor in explanation, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.3758/s13423-016-1192-5](https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-016-1192-5)

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