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Metaphors and the Social Work Profession: A Brief Overview

Finding the right word is as important as finding the right evidence.
—Lens (2005, p. 234)

Since people think in metaphors, the key to understanding human thought is to deconstruct those metaphors.
—Pinker (2008, p. 238)

The word "metaphor" derives from the Greek word *metaphora,* which means to change the location of something (*meta*) from one place to another by moving or carrying it (*phor*) (Gould, 1995). According to Donald Schön (1979), "Metaphorical utterances" constitute "the 'carrying over' of frames or perspectives from one domain of experience to another" (p. 254). In the pages that follow, I describe the various ways in which negative perspectives or feelings, often presented in the guise of specific metaphor themes or disgust-laden phenomena, are carried over to and have an adverse impact on marginalized populations and serve to reinforce the development of public policy initiatives that act in opposition to and seek to control or disparage such groups. As I argue, this information is essential for social workers and other allies for social justice to understand if they are to adequately engage in their role as advocates for both vulnerable and oppressed groups and the profession itself. Effective engagement in the policy arena to support the profession's goals requires a basic understanding of metaphors.

OVERVIEW OF METAPHORS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

At their most basic level, metaphors include both a source and a target domain.[1] In the case of the frequently used welfare-recipient-as-parasite metaphor, for example, the parasite constitutes the source domain, and welfare recipient constitutes the target. The primary rationale for the metaphor is to carry over, or transfer, important although often covert aspects of the source entity (for example, dependence, weakness, laziness, low or diminished status, potential to harm the host or contaminate others) to the target. One of the reasons that the welfare-recipient-as-parasite metaphor is so potent is surely because in the popular imagination they reside together. Parasites and disease have always been associated with those who live in tenements, ghettoes, asylums, and other spaces that are associated with abject poverty. Not only has disease long been associated with poverty and foreignness, but moreover, these target groups are presumed to be responsible for both causing and spreading, rather than being victimized by, such parasites and diseases (Goatly, 2007). It is not reaching too far to say that in the popular imagination, metaphorical human parasites (homeless people, welfare recipients, people with certain disabilities) are perceived to be a vector through which real parasites connect to or threaten to invade the normal population.

To quote Susan Sontag (1990), "Saying a thing is or is like something-it-is-not is a mental operation as old as philosophy and poetry, and the spawning ground of most kinds of understanding, including scientific understanding, and expressiveness" (p. 93). Others have written that metaphors are the means by which societies build "webs of collective meaning" (Harrington, 1995) and that the "ultimate way to extend one's perspective to others is through metaphor" (Ellwood, 1995, p. 93). Although many would contend that metaphors simply constitute a novel or interesting way of describing something that has little real impact on how people think or respond to issues, an accumulation of evidence stands in contrast to this contention and demonstrates metaphors' important although often subliminal impact. As Lee and Schwartz (2013) wrote, "A rapidly growing body of experimental research provides persuasive evidence

[1]A version of some of the content in this section was previously published in O'Brien (2009).

for the role of metaphors in human thought" (p. 86). This is obviously important because how people think about issues has a direct impact on how they respond to them, including through public policies. I return to and expand on this issue in chapter 2.

The connection of source and target domains "through metaphor can affect the way that those domains are understood, causing the perceived similarity of members of the two domains to increase" (Allbritton, 1995, p. 36). Along with others, George Lakoff (1995), a leading contemporary metaphor analyst and scholar, contended that it is virtually impossible for people to think without the automatic subconscious assistance of metaphors, and metaphors therefore play a crucial role in how people understand the world around them. One reason for this is that people develop an awareness of new or unfamiliar phenomena on the basis of what they already know, often through metaphoric connections.

In complex fields of study whose many intricacies are beyond most people's understanding, experts or commentators will use concrete, real-world examples to explain important research findings, hypotheses, or new developments (Ringmar, 2008). Thus, complicated medical or genetic advancements are often described to the general public through the medium of metaphoric analogies (Boone, 1988). The Human Genome Project, for example, may be described as a search for the Holy Grail of human essence (Nelkin & Tancredi, 1989), or HIV may be framed as a Trojan horse virus or time bomb that invades the body and silently waits until the right time to strike. Many professors in social work as well as in other professions certainly try to find metaphors that can serve as a bridge to what may be challenging cognitive terrain for students.

How People Respond to Metaphors

As noted earlier, metaphors not only may provide meaning about the alleged "essence" of a thing, person, or group, but also may carry covert or overt messages about the recommended modes of treating or responding to the target or targets (Schön, 1979). If welfare recipients are parasites, their segregation from the mainstream community is likely to be maintained. People may develop methods of marking such individuals, as well as a system of surveillance, and find ways to control their movements within the community. They may also take action to ensure that these individuals will not propagate and spread. The response to such people, in short, may be akin to a form of sanitation control or preventive public

health.[2] As Kövecses (2010) noted, metaphors are generally unidirectional, in that the source domain affects people's beliefs about the target, but not the other way around. In other words, drawing on the preceding example, people's revulsion toward parasites may adversely influence how they respond to welfare recipients, but welfare recipients' attributes are not going to be used to frame how people view parasites.

An important theme in this book is that a particular metaphor's impact on policy and thus the way in which the funding and service pathway is framed is especially important in whether one attributes an individual or a systemic or environmental cause to particular problems and thus where the focus for change (or implied blame) lies. The parasite metaphor related to welfare, homelessness, and poverty implies that individuals are at fault for their conditions. Parasites are not expected or even capable of change; they (and their progeny) are what they were born to be. All that is important is that they not threaten the mass of the population, that they stay in their place. Policies that inadvertently support their spread are viewed as inimical to community health. A differing metaphor that would carry with it assumptions about systemic rather than individual dysfunction is the mechanical metaphor, in which society is seen as a machine that has simply stopped functioning in certain ways, and various groups are adversely affected by the breakdown of the machinery—caught in the gears, so to speak.

Conceptual Metaphors

In addition to linguistic metaphors, scholars frequently point out the importance of more broad conceptual metaphors. A conceptual metaphor relates not just to a metaphorical term, phrase, or image but to a more global way of thinking about a particular object, person or people, group, or social problem (Allbritton, 1995). Many scholars have described conceptual metaphors as a form of mapping (Landau &

[2]To provide one example, sterilizing people with intellectual disabilities, welfare recipients, or other undesirable segments of the population has been described by some scholars as akin to other forms of sterilization (for example, of medical instruments)—as a method of ensuring that contagious diseases will not spread. It is not completely surprising that an early term for "genes" was "germ plasm." In a sense, genes, and particularly bad genes, were viewed as potentially contaminating entities during the eugenics era because they carried adverse characteristics from parents to their children (Pernick, 1996). Anyone who inadvertently mated with a representative of such a family was also apt to find their own blood (as well as that of their descendants) contaminated.

Keefer, 2014). If, for example, welfare recipients are viewed as parasites, one can consider the various characteristics that seem to typify both the source and the target entities and specifically identify and focus on those characteristics or traits that most closely relate to both domains. As the connection between the source and target domain is solidified and becomes part of people's belief system, they subconsciously selectively take note of and incorporate those characterological elements that connect the two. People are additionally drawn to and find comfort in those media sources, authorities, stories, and modes of presentation that support their pre-existing metaphoric framings. Questioning prevailing metaphors may lead to fear and anxiety because they may be part of an interconnected web of meaning that tells people much about the nature of the world and their role in it.

Metaphors can even be reified, or made to appear real, through social actions that formalize the connection between the source and target domains (Harper & Raman, 2008; O'Brien, 2010). For example, although Jews were metaphorically viewed as parasites and contagious entities in Nazi Germany, this metaphor was reified when they were placed in disease environs. In some Nazi writing from the Holocaust, it is almost difficult to tell whether certain descriptors of contaminating Jews were metaphoric or not.[3] Indeed, such obscurity was the point because the writers implicitly understood that the conflation of the metaphoric with reality would ensure that the metaphoric image would be more willingly accepted by the public. Because of the frequent use of contagion-laced images, German citizens realized that, for their own protection, if for no other reason, they should treat Jews as if they indeed carried a transmissible disease or lice. Even those people who might have Jewish blood but who identified themselves as Aryan were to be avoided in the same way in which one might refrain from contact with an asymptomatic carrier of disease.

A related example is the McCarthy-era view of Communism. Over time, the Communist net was increasingly widened to include not only those who had been involved in targeted groups or activities, but even individuals with whom they came into contact. Communism itself came

[3]As I further discuss in chapter 5, contagion metaphors related to Jews were a central metaphor theme of *Mein Kampf* (Hitler, 1971), written almost a decade before Hitler was elected into office. They became particularly important during the Third Reich, however, as the state-as-body-or-physical-organism metaphor came to be embraced as a central conceptual theme undergirding Nazi rule (Harrington, 1995; Musolff, 2007).

to be viewed as a form of contagion, in large part because anti-Communist writings were rife with contagion metaphors. In a 1954 article published in *Vital Speeches of the Day,* former President Herbert Hoover provided a range of such metaphors. He described, for example, the "bloody virus type" of Communism that "is today rotting the souls of two-fifths of all mankind" (p. 681). He deplored the "poison gas" spread by "fuzzy-minded intellectuals" and noted that "only a drop of typhoid in a barrel of drinking water sickens a whole village" (p. 681).[4]

Metaphors and Social Policy Development

The primary goal of this book is to point out to social workers and other allies for social justice the importance of metaphoric patterns in how political stakeholders and the public at large respond to marginalized groups, particularly through social policy development. I argue that advocacy for oppressed populations, which is a key element of social work, dictates that social workers become capable of analyzing or deconstructing harmful metaphoric patterns, understand how these metaphors support demeaning stereotypes, and strive to shed light on why such images are often so effective in creating a specific perceptual image of these devalued community subgroups. To reiterate a crucial point, these shared public images do not influence just public policy and public relations. Because these images support specific response options over others, they have a real-world impact on the direction taken by social service agencies and the service opportunities that are allowed to develop. The creation, maintenance, evolution, or even destruction of certain agencies or service funding streams, then, is directly related to these problem and response framings. Those social service agencies or jobs that are most likely to be funded will be those that are most in line with the existing metaphoric or framing pathway.[5]

I return to this issue in the forthcoming chapters. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, however, I take up the issue of metaphors as they have been used in social work and related fields of practice.

[4]The perception that Communism was akin to a communicable disease was certainly supported in part by the efforts that were made during the McCarthy era to connect Communism to homosexuality; even long before the HIV scare, religious leaders and others conceptually connected male homosexuality to the spread of disease.

[5]Many examples of this are found in the literature. A few good ones are Annas (1995), who reviewed the impact of health care metaphors on health policy, and Ellwood (1995), who described the framing of the War on Drugs. I share additional examples throughout the book.

Although little has been written in the profession about the importance of metaphor analysis for policy advocacy, metaphors have long had a central place in the profession in their support of both client assessment and therapeutic treatment.

METAPHORS AND SOCIAL WORK: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Although some social work writings have described the potential importance of metaphor analysis in the profession, few of these works have touched on policy and the related social justice considerations. Normally, metaphor is discussed as a useful tool for micro- or meso-level clinical intervention because "metaphoric language has been an important therapeutic tool since the first counselor attempted to understand fully a client's experience of the world" (Wickman, Daniels, White, & Fesmire, 1999, p. 389). As Fox (1989) wrote, metaphors "are indispensable sources of information and guidance for both diagnosis and treatment" (p. 233). Articles by M. V. Adams (1997) and Lyddon, Clay, and Sparks (2001) provide examples of metaphors as a fruitful means of providing clients with increased awareness of their issues, as an unusual but potentially beneficial method of soliciting difficult information from individuals or, as Lyddon et al. noted, for "introducing new frames of reference" from which clients can consider their issues or goals. T. K. Duffy (2001) delineated various means of using metaphors to facilitate group work, and Amy Wilder (2004) discussed the importance of metaphors as an instructive way to understand group practice, focusing specifically on the metaphor of the human body as descriptive of group functioning.

As several of these writers have discussed, clients often draw on metaphors when making judgments about the issues that have led them to seek assistance from a social worker. The problems that couples may have, for example, often surround differences in the metaphors they use to view the world or their relationship (Wickman et al., 1999). Goldstein (1999) wrote that human problems "are not comprised of literal, objective facts" but rather are constructed in part "by metaphors that represent the way people think, reason, remember and talk about themselves" (p. 385). An example of this is the use of what I refer to as the "linear metaphor," whereby people judge themselves and their accomplishments (their goals, homes, cars, jobs, income, spouses, children, and so on) in comparison with others.

Especially in a highly competitive capitalist society, people are patterned to focus on conceptualizations of higher and lower, and they tend to move through their lives with an invisible measuring stick as their guide.

One should note, however, that metaphors are not just important in people's conscious efforts to make sense of the world and their individual situations. M. V. Adams (1997), for one, contended that the unconscious "is structured in and through metaphors" (p. 36). Many metaphors, as I show later, are designed to work in a largely subliminal fashion, particularly in the policy arena.

USING METAPHORS IN THERAPY

In his book *Metaphor Therapy,* Richard Kopp (1995) described in detail how clinicians can use metaphors in therapy. He said that although metaphors are a beneficial means of having clients discuss difficult issues in a symbolic or indirect manner, clinicians should not be highly purposeful in guiding clients. They might ask probing questions to pull out or expand on a metaphor, but the metaphor itself, as well as the meaning it holds, should normally be under the client's control. For example, if a client feels like she is in a pit or surrounded by a brick wall, she should be the one to describe the specific elements of this image and expand on it if need be. Sana Loue (2008) wrote that "clients can assume ownership and take their metaphors with them upon leaving therapy" (p. 134), as a touchstone. A metaphor that the client develops can form an entry point from which that client can further describe her or his situation and perhaps even develop possible response options.

Stott, Mansell, Salkovskis, Lavendar, and Cartwright-Hatton (2010) added that metaphors are particularly beneficial in counseling because clients often view their situation through a distorting lens, and metaphors may provide a novel, concrete means of perceiving their situation that might bring a degree of clarity. Stott et al. added that some of the most well-respected psychotherapists considered metaphors to be instrumental features of their clinical toolbox. The American therapist Milton Erickson (as cited in Stott et al., 2010) focused on metaphors as a means of activating "meaning in his clients at an implicit . . . level" (p. 12), and metaphoric images and words were a particularly important element of early psychoanalysis (see also Haley, 1973; Lyness & Thomas, 1995; Wickman et al., 1999). Both Freud and Jung were highly motivated by image metaphors, which were a seminal component of dream analysis (Fox, 1989;

Jung, 1964). M. V. Adams (1997) wrote that Freudian psychotherapy itself can be viewed as an example of the archeology metaphor, whereby the psychiatrist engages in a symbolic "excavation of buried ruins" that exists in clients' minds. Leary (1990) added that "a taxonomist would have to work long and hard to classify Freud's many metaphors" (p. 18).

Image- and Story-Based Metaphors

Word metaphors are an important component of word association tests, as are image metaphors in such assessment tools as the Rorschach Test. Image-based metaphors are a particularly crucial aspect of art therapy; family sculpting; sand, play, and puppet therapy; and other approaches that are designed to indirectly solicit information when openly innervating traumatic experiences is not the preferred method, particularly in work with children and adolescents or with adults recovering from trauma (Lyness & Thomas, 1995; Palmer, 2002).

Art therapist Shirley Riley (1999) wrote that "adolescents are constantly using their own individualized metaphors" and that "metaphor is another aspect of their creativity applied to communication" (p. 44). David Crenshaw (2006) added that "the power of symbol to evoke images for healing is the common thread that runs through all creative arts therapies" (p. 32). Saari (1986) contended that adolescents may particularly benefit from metaphor-related therapy because they may be "too old for play therapy and yet they are not truly capable of dealing with their problems purely through a direct discussion as is expected of adults" (p. 18).

Yet another way to indirectly solicit information in therapy with children is to use the metaphors contained in animal stories or fairy tales as prompts (Bettelheim, 1976; Combs & Freedman, 1990; Williams, 1995). Whether they pertain to images or words, metaphors are also important in narrative therapy, where they may allow clients to put a particular face on their feelings or situation and provide concrete examples that describe their feelings, hopes, or fears (Rutten, Mottart, & Soetaert, 2010). Ceremonies such as family rituals or certain family artifacts[6] may also serve as important metaphors for some clients (Combs & Freedman, 1990), and shared family metaphors may "serve as repositories of family experience and as guides for behavior" (Fox, 1989, p. 238).

[6]Family Bibles, for example, often carry a special significance not only because of their nature as a sacred text, but also because they may include family ancestral trees or other important family information.

Using Analogies in Therapy

Metaphors may allow individuals to provide explanations of their struggles or feelings by drawing on comfortable analogies, thus remaining in cognitive territory where they feel at home and in some control. A golfer who feels as though she is stuck in a rut and going nowhere may say she is in a sand trap, continually swinging at the ball but not moving on; a swimmer may feel like he is tethered to the side of the pool; a car dealer may feel as though he keeps trying to make the sale, but it never happens; and so forth. These examples can not only provide a viable mode of describing a situation, but also serve as potential areas for probing; in some cases, they may even provide some direction for resolving important dilemmas (Kopp, 1995). Hauser and Schwartz (2015) noted that metaphors "can affect the amount of message elaboration when they link the target to a domain that is of interest" (p. 67) to the client. In other words, if the clinician is aware of a particular interest of the client, the clinician can attempt to find ways to use analogies from that domain to assist in the treatment process.

An interesting form of therapy from Great Britain drew heavily on football (soccer to most of us who live in the United States) as a means of not only drawing men into therapy, but also providing a conceptual foundation for describing the various elements of the helping process. Men who were otherwise averse to talk therapy were able to bond over discussions that tacked back and forth between soccer and their own issues or problems and used a series of athletic metaphors to discuss their situations. The group was constituted as a team, with all members assisting each other and drawing on their own personal strengths to support goals. Lay leaders were not therapists but coaches, and sessions were referred to as "matches." The metaphor was even used spatially, because the group met in a stadium (Spandler, Roy, & Mckeown, 2014).

USE OF METAPHORS TO DECONSTRUCT COMPLEX ISSUES

Using metaphors to support a connection with or to empower clients may be particularly important when the social worker and client have radically different histories or experiences. Maria Zuñiga (1992) wrote that metaphors can be beneficial in the context of culturally competent practice. Especially when clients may have a different ethnic,

demographic, or cultural background than the therapist, metaphors and sayings that are endemic to the client's culture may not only allow that client to express feelings and thoughts, but also assist the social worker in better understanding that culture and its value system, history, and traditions. Certain metaphors can also be used to provide shared meaning across different cultures.

Social workers use broad metaphors to make sense of the world, and they thus play an important role in assessment and treatment. Walter L. Miller (1980) discussed the central role of the medical model in social work, wherein professionals have carried over methods of diagnostics and treatment from the medical professions. As he noted, this way of perceiving the world, and individual and family issues, carries with it a wealth of potential problems. It is particularly instructive that this view has, as one might assume, especially been used in areas of social work that closely relate to medicine and rehabilitation.

Many disability scholars have discussed the anger and hurt that people with disabilities often feel in their relationships with social workers as a result of the latter's use of the medical model, which tends to focus heavily on deficits and the disempowerment of patients because of their presumed incapacities (Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2015). Disability itself has a great many metaphoric undertones, and the assumptions that professionals often have regarding how disability should be framed are often at odds with how it is perceived by those who are directly affected (Lane, 1992). Indeed, it could be beneficial to compare a social worker's metaphor for the helping relationship with clients as a way of comparing their respective views of the treatment process and goals. An involuntary client, for example, may view the process from the perspective of the military metaphor, as a battle against the social worker. The challenge for the social worker might be to find a more productive metaphor as a mode of framing the relationship.

Journey Metaphor

Goldstein (1999) described root metaphors as basic truths about the world as social workers see it that inform their interactions with clients. As alluded to in some of the preceding examples, the nature of clinical social work means that certain broad metaphor themes are particularly apropos to the work engaged in by clinical social workers. One of these themes is the journey metaphor, whereby the client is viewed as being on

a search or quest, with the social worker as a temporary guide who can assist in finding and interpreting clues that will help lead the client in the right direction or as a traveler with some previous knowledge of the terrain. The journey metaphor, with the client in the role of seeker and the worker in the role of guide, is much more humanizing than, for example, the mechanistic metaphor, in which the client is in need of fixing by the therapist or technician.

It is interesting that politicians also frequently invoke the journey metaphor for their own purposes. What Charteris-Black (2011) wrote in his book *Politicians and Rhetoric* could apply to the helping professions. He contended that journey metaphors are particularly useful because they connect people with powerful myths. The late Joseph Campbell (2008) discussed this at length in his various writings on the hero's journey. Certainly, there are many ways in which journey metaphors provide an apt way of describing the work of both clients and clinicians. Specific elements of a journey (searching for direction or needing a compass; not knowing which way to turn; feeling lost, broken down, or in foreign or unknown territory; wanting to take risks or experience new things but also maintain a feeling of security, and so forth) map onto social work intervention very closely. More important, Campbell's hero must go through struggles and hardships before attaining the status of a hero.

Metaphors across Bodies, Space, and Boundaries

Finally, social workers need to be aware of the important functional, living metaphors that may play an important ongoing role in clients' lives. An example of this is the relationship between one's body and the spaces one occupies, particularly one's home. People's body and home can be said to be the two most important containers in their lives, and they implicitly draw analogies from one to the other. Elderly people in particular may view the functional problems in their homes as experientially analogous to the physical problems they struggle with, especially when they have lived in their homes for many years and closely identify with them. Not only may the problems in their homes or property draw attention to their own ailments because they may have a decreased ability to attend to the former (for example, climb a ladder, fix carpentry or electrical problems, garden or mow, even use the stairs), but there may be specific home–body correlates that arise: The windows and doors creak as arthritis sets in; weeds sprout up more in the garden (or gutter) as hair grows in areas

where it previously did not; the cracks in the paint become more noticeable as wrinkles spread on the face or body; the plumbing leaks more as incontinence looms, and so forth.

Spaces, including social service agencies and client homes and neighborhoods, can themselves be viewed metaphorically because they impart meaning to clients, workers, and the general public. The internal and external spatial components of social service agencies say something important about their mission and their perspective on those to whom they provide services. Dolmage (2011) wrote that "spaces and discourses work together to impose social order" (p. 55), and O'Donnell (2006) wrote that the "environment reflects, channels, facilitates, and shapes who communicates with whom, under what conditions, how, when, where, and in what context" (p. 214). O'Donnell added that architecture can be a symbol of ideology and that people "are often unaware of the persuasive and propagandistic effects that the environment has on them" (p. 221).

Metaphors are also frequently used, especially through mass media, to identify spaces and support demeaning stereotypes about particular communities or facilities that are occupied by marginalized populations (G. D. Adams & Cantor, 2001). Communities may be labeled as blighted if such a designation is helpful in having a neighborhood condemned for eminent domain purposes (Pinker, 2008; Wiley, 1990). Just as individuals or families may take on a stigmatized identity, so too may communities and, by association, those who live in them.

As I discuss further in chapter 2, metaphors are often embodied, or developed at a basic level, through people's personal and sensory experiences as they move through life (Gregg, 2004). Social workers in particular should be aware of the important role that spaces (including one's body) may play in the lives of the people with whom they work. The spaces people occupy, and especially the ones social workers have a hand in creating or changing (and that help create and change them), say something important about those people, as well as their values, identities, and goals. Beyond this, both constructed and natural spaces may have a very important metaphoric impact on how people come to view the world around them. Metaphoric embodiment likely plays a particularly important role in regard to people with physical disabilities or other physical features that are judged by others to be nonnormative (Linton, 2007).

Another important metaphoric theme that cuts across the various levels of social work intervention relates to boundaries. People frequently

view the world in terms of lines, boundaries, crossings, and so forth. This is discussed, for example, in relation to enmeshed relationships or families, personal isolation, feelings of personal violation, questions of who has access to the family or social system, who the gatekeepers are, and what informal rules they follow. Ben-Amitay, Buchbinder, and Torin (2015), in their study of women who were sexually victimized and the metaphors they used, noted that boundary metaphors were important in these women's view of their trauma and its continued impact. It goes without saying that boundary metaphors are extremely important in community-based social work and include issues such as geographic and institutional areas and their meaning and boundary crossings (or lack thereof). As further noted in the chapter 4 discussion of dehumanization, both theorists and propagandists have often speculated over the course of time where the proper boundaries of humanity lie and what groups properly belong there (Ritvo, 1995).

METAPHORS AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Some authors have contended that metaphors may be a beneficial mode of teaching social work students, especially for content areas in which creative forms of education may be necessary. James Forte (2009) wrote that metaphors could be useful in teaching human behavior in the social environment content, and Leela Thomas (2007) noted that in instances in which social work students find it hard to grasp important concepts related to statistics through traditional teaching methods, metaphor may be useful (also see Bougher, 2012). This makes sense because, as noted earlier, one of the major reasons for the frequent use of metaphors is to present complex issues through concrete, experiential examples.

Being able to understand or deconstruct metaphors and other forms of rhetoric is also an important—I would argue essential—aspect of critical thinking (Murdach, 2006). If social workers cannot grasp the meaning behind terminology, descriptions, or images and do not understand their proper context, how can they truly engage in critical thought related to these terms or images? Words in particular form the building blocks of dialogue and engagement, in social work and elsewhere. To assume that words have the same meaning for everyone; that certain words do not carry particular baggage (at least for some people); or that humans do

not know how to wield words to hurt, cajole, comfort, embarrass, compliment, or manipulate others is simply wrong. If one gives credence to the power of words, as social workers surely must, one needs to embrace metaphors and their importance in human interaction and self-awareness. Metaphors are "an important vehicle to understand . . . the nature of the helping relationship" (Weinberg, 2005, p. 2) and of human interactions of all kinds. The better social workers are able to interpret metaphors, the better they will understand clients, students, colleagues, the profession itself, and, as the central theme of this book points out, how to operate successfully in the political arena.

METAPHORS ABOUT SOCIAL WORK

Metaphors can also provide a fruitful means for students and professionals to share their feelings about field placements, personal or professional frustrations or accomplishments, or particular clientele. This is especially true in relation to what Weinberg (2005) referred to as "outlaw emotions," or feelings that individuals may not want to directly express because of their perception that these feelings clash with the hegemonic view of social work.

In her analysis of descriptions of young low-income mothers by student workers, Weinberg (2005) delineated several examples of animalistic comparisons made by students, for example, comparing mothers with baboons, porcupines, and other animals. She questioned whether such perceptions support a hierarchical view that justifies to students the power imbalance in the worker–client relationship. Although one might respond in a judgmental fashion to such views, they can be a starting point for instructive discussions of what specific metaphors represent.

John Sumarah (1989), too, contended that various metaphor themes characterize social workers' view of their clients. As he noted, "Metaphors influence the manner in which people think and feel about themselves and others and the way in which they act and react to one another" (p. 19). In a study of British social workers, Chris Beckett (2003) noted that they frequently used military metaphors in their descriptions of their jobs. Many of these workers felt as though they were constantly under siege, and the formal use of military rhetoric in their jobs may have, without their being aware of it, led to more colloquial or informal expressions (for example, being bombarded by clients) that aligned with the metaphor.

More important, these metaphors said much about how these workers viewed not only their jobs, but also their clients, supervisors, and agency.[7]

Regardless of the extent to which social workers stop to think about it, metaphors are all around them and have much to do with the activities of the profession and the way they perceive the world. Although social workers may instinctively comprehend the usefulness of metaphors, it is unlikely that they often take the time to purposefully deconstruct them or attempt to understand the role they play in either their professional lives or the world around them. As many practitioners have found, the embedded metaphoric images that social workers carry around with them, or that they consciously develop, can either help or hinder their development, and understanding these images can be a fruitful source of assessment and intervention.

[7]One might assume that various types of organizational structures or policies or staff–client or staff–supervisor relationships will affect the formation of meta-metaphors that are taken on by an agency. Although war metaphors might be expected in agencies with a heavy focus on working with veterans, for example, they might also easily develop and spread in any agency that deals with involuntary clientele, where workers have to battle to gain client support, and obstinate clients could even be viewed as enemies in the context of the treatment process.