



## Flash Report

## Framing love: When it hurts to think we were made for each other

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Framing love as perfect unity can hurt relationship satisfaction.
- It hurts relationship satisfaction only in conflicts, not in celebrations.
- This content dependency supports metaphorical framing, not metaphorical transfer.
- Metaphorical framing effects are limited to targets to which frames are applicable.

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## ABSTRACT

Love can be metaphorically framed as perfect unity between two halves made for each other or as a journey with ups and downs. Given their differential interpretations of romantic relationship, these frames have the power to change the evaluative impact of relational conflicts. We find that thinking about conflicts with one's partner hurts more with the unity (vs. journey) frame in mind, whether the frames are activated within the relational context using linguistic expressions (Study 1) or in an unrelated context using physical cues (Studies 2a & 2b). The frames only influence relationship evaluation after thinking about conflicts (but not celebrations) and require applicability to the target. These patterns support the logic of metaphorical framing as distinct from metaphorical transfer. They shed new light on how to think about love, how it matters for relationship evaluation, and fundamentally, how frames influence judgments.

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## Introduction

*"Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies."*

[– Aristotle]

*"I, \_\_\_\_, take you, \_\_\_\_, to be my wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward 'till death do us part."*

[– Traditional wedding vow]

Love is a topic of celebration and interest across all societies (Hatfield & Rapson, 2002), from ancient poetry and philosophy to contemporary culture and psychology. While its complexity allows endless characterizations (e.g., [www.1-love-quotes.com](http://www.1-love-quotes.com)), underlying such diversity are

common themes that reveal the use of conceptual metaphors in thinking about love (Gibbs & Nascimento, 1996; Kovecses, 1988; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In particular, two metaphorical frames—love as perfect unity and love as a journey—appear to highlight distinct aspects of a romantic relationship and ascribe different meanings to relational difficulties. Do these frames have the power to change people's evaluation of their relationship?

The love-as-unity metaphor is exemplified by Aristotle's poetic line and commonly invoked in daily discourse (e.g., *we were made for each other, my other half*). It characterizes love as "perfect harmony, an idyllic state" (Kovecses, 1988, p. 19), created and stabilized by "the bond or attachment between the two parts" (p. 20). In this frame, relational difficulties would signal the lack of perfect harmony and call into question whether she really is his *perfect match* and the two hearts really *beat as one*. In contrast, the love-as-journey metaphor, as in the wedding vow, emphasizes "the progress and the purpose of the love relationship and the difficulties involved" (p. 15). In this frame, relational difficulties are inherent to any relationship and are meaningful as lovers *sharing their ride* recount *how far they have come*. In love fiction, "happily ever after" appears on the last page for a reason: After that, there is not much of a story to tell. It is the struggles and conflicts before they live

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**Table 1**  
Demographics of study samples.

Study	Gender		Age (in years)		Currently in a relationship?		Duration (in years) of current relationship, if applicable	
	Men	Women	Range	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Yes	No	Range	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
1	22	42	20–69	42.4 (13.3)	64 (16 long-term/committed, 2 engaged, 46 married)	0	0.5–44.7	15.4 (12.6)
2a	75	92	18–30	20.9 (2.2)	70	97	0.1–7.0	2.2 (1.8)
2b	35	50	18–27	20.6 (2.1)	40	45	0.2–6.5	1.9 (1.7)

happily ever after that tell a story with twists and turns, that give the relationship meaning and fulfillment.

Given their divergent interpretations of love, the unity and journey frames may differentially shape the way people evaluate their romantic relationship. Specifically, people may evaluate their relationship more negatively after thinking about relational conflicts in the unity frame (wherein conflicts signal disunity) than in the journey frame (wherein conflicts are part of progress). In contrast, the two frames may have no differential impact on relationship evaluation when thinking about relational celebrations because positive experiences, whether interpreted as harmony (in the unity frame) or growth (in the journey frame), are satisfying. Drawing on the principles of knowledge accessibility and applicability (Higgins, 1996; also Förster & Liberman, 2007), we predict that (i) these patterns should emerge even by making the metaphorical frames merely accessible in incidental ways and (ii) the frames should only influence judgment of targets to which they are applicable. As an initial test of these predictions, Study 1 manipulates exposure to linguistic expressions of the love frames and measures judgments of satisfaction with relationship (a target to which love frames are applicable) and with life (inapplicable).

### Study 1: Can it hurt to think we were made for each other?

#### Material and methods

Seventy-three pedestrians in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan, who had been in a relationship for at least half a year, participated in a study on long-term romantic relationships. They were randomly



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

**Fig. 1.** Mean relationship satisfaction by metaphor exposure and recall valence in Study 1.

assigned to 2 (exposure to unity vs. journey metaphor)  $\times$  2 (recall of conflicts vs. celebrations) between-subject conditions.

They first completed a brief knowledge quiz by indicating whether they had ever heard of five linguistic expressions; three expressions primed either unity (*we are one, my better half, made for each other*) or journey (*we've walked together, a long trail, look how far we've come*) and two were fillers (*cross your fingers, drink like a fish*). Then they recalled and wrote down “two things you and your partner *fought over*” or “*celebrated*.” Next, they rated “How satisfied are you with your romantic relationship?” and “How satisfied are you with your life in general?” (1 = *very dissatisfied*, 11 = *very satisfied*). Finally, they provided demographic information.

Eight participants failed to write down two fights or two celebrations; one used ratings beyond the scale range and joked about the questions. They were excluded from analysis. Table 1 shows the demographics of the analyzed sample ( $N = 64$ ).

#### Results

As predicted (Fig. 1), participants who had to recall conflicts reported lower relationship satisfaction after exposure to unity than journey expressions (planned-contrast  $t(60) = 2.77, p = .007, d = 0.97$ ), whereas participants who had to recall celebrations were satisfied with their relationship regardless of metaphor exposure ( $t(60) = 1.01, p = .29$ ; see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). In fact, after exposure to journey expressions participants who had to recall conflicts were as satisfied with their relationship as those who had to recall celebrations ( $t(60) = 0.14, p = .89$ ), whereas after exposure to unity expressions participants who had to recall conflicts were much less satisfied with their relationship than those who had to recall celebrations ( $t(60) = 3.82, p < .001$ ). These different patterns were reflected in the predicted metaphor  $\times$  recall interaction ( $F(1, 60) = 7.37, p = .009$ ).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, life satisfaction ratings were unaffected by metaphor exposure, recall valence, or their interaction ( $F_s \leq 1.66, p_s \geq .20$ ), indicating that love frames influenced judgment of relationship, but not life in general.

#### Discussion

Bringing the unity frame to mind hurts relationship satisfaction if conflicts are salient, not if celebrations are salient. This suggests that metaphorical *framing* effects are dependent on the content being framed, distinct from metaphorical *transfer* effects. Metaphorical transfer, constituting the lion's share of recent metaphor research (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010; Lee & Schwarz, 2014), involves the transfer of attributes from one domain to another (e.g., warmth to affection;

<sup>1</sup> The remaining effects were of little theoretical interest. Specifically, relationship satisfaction was significantly lower after recalling conflicts than celebrations (main effect of recall,  $F(1, 60) = 6.33, p = .02$ ) and nonsignificantly lower after exposure to unity than journey expressions (main effect of metaphor,  $F(1, 60) = 1.45, p = .23$ ).

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