



## FlashReport

## Seeing love, or seeing lust: How people interpret ambiguous romantic situations

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## ABSTRACT

Interpreting ambiguous situations is a task individuals face on a daily basis. In romantic contexts the accurate interpretation of these situations is of particular importance. In the present set of studies we investigated how level of construal guides individual perception in these cases. When a high level of construal was induced participants likely interpreted a given interpersonal situation as the start or the continuation of a long lasting relationship. When a low level of construal was induced the same situations were more likely interpreted as leading to a one-night stand (in a dating situation) or involving little chance of a common future for both actors (in a break-up situation). In sum, the present studies demonstrate construal level to be a crucial determinant of the interpretation of ambiguous romantic situations. We discuss these findings in relation to the functional independence of love and sex, level of construal, and social perception.

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A look, a smile, a subtle gesture. These simple cues are oftentimes the only hint individuals have when they start to date a person. Many of us would be happy to obtain some kind of “accurate” interpretation of what the situation is about. The cues are subtle and ambiguous. Making the wrong move at the wrong time could lead to a disaster. Of course one could also see the setting as a kind of trial and error situation with an exciting outcome. Whatever view you prefer it is clear that romantic situations can contain a lot of ambiguity that needs to be dealt with by individuals, or in other words is a very complex decision situation (e.g. Chapdelaine, Kenny, & LaFontana (1994); Eastwick & Finkel (2008); Hatfield & Rapson (1995); Hatfield & Sprecher (1986)).

Interpreting ambiguous behaviors is guided by preexisting information we have about the other person (Uleman, Newman, & Moskowitz, 1996), activated cognitive concepts (Srull & Wyer, 1979; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977), and our own goals in a situation (McCulloch, Ferguson, Kawada, & Bargh, 2008). In determining whether a dating context leads to a long lasting love story or a one-time sexual encounter the way individuals mentally represent the situation might play a crucial role. Diamond (2003, 2004) suggested that love and sex are functionally independent. She cites evidence from various areas of psychology and physiology indicating that both concepts activate very different mental and bodily processes.

Recent research showed distinct effects on perceptual and conceptual attention (Förster, 2010; Förster, Epstude, & Özelsel, 2009; Förster, Özelsel, & Epstude, 2010). Love broadened participants' perceptual scope, while sex narrowed it down. Moreover love led to increased performance on creativity tasks (that usually profit from activation of broad categories) while sex improved performance on analytical tasks (that profit from activation of narrow categories; Förster et al., 2009). Consistent with recent theorizing (Förster & Dannenberg, 2010) it was suggested that perceptual scope is strongly linked to conceptual scope of information processing (Förster & Dannenberg, 2010) and results showed that the perceptual style elicited by priming love or sex mediated effects on higher order conceptual tasks (Förster et al., 2009, 2010).

Furthermore, one may relate love versus sex to different construal levels and psychological distance (Liberman & Trope, 2008, Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). While love is an abstract concept generally associated with a long-term temporal perspective (Aron & Aron, 1986), sex is relevant in the here and now. Consistently, in Förster et al.'s (2010) thoughts related to distant future events mediated the effects of love versus sex on conceptual scope. It seems that because people usually think about love in high-level construals and they think about sex in low-level construals, such associations are stored in memory and influence ways of processing information out of participants' awareness. Is there a possibility of a bidirectional link?

The assumed links inspired us to hypothesize that in an ambiguous dating context the activation of a high level of construal should lead to a stronger tendency to interpret the situation in terms of love, than in terms of sex. In contrast, activation of a low level of construal should lead to the opposite interpretation.

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## Overview of the studies

Across three studies we manipulated level of construal; such priming phase was followed by the evaluation of an ambiguous dating situation (Studies 1 and 2) or a complex break-up scenario (Study 3).

### Study 1

#### Participants and design

Forty-six students (27 females) participated in a 2 level of construal (between: high, low)  $\times$  2 interpretation (within: love, sex) design.

#### Procedure

The first part of the study consisted of various vignettes that were based on the materials used by Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope (2004). Participants were presented with six vignettes unrelated to dating, love, or sex (e.g. Henk plans to take driving lessons); while half of the participants had to write down *how* the actor does something (low construal level), the other half had to write down *why* the actor does it (high construal level). Next, participants received another vignette describing how a male and female meet each other at a bar, and obviously find each other attractive. The story stopped at the point at which the male brings the female to the doorstep of her home. Participants were asked to complete the story. After that participants rated on different dimensions what likely happened using scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Scales included two items directly asking whether the couple starts a serious relationship (e.g. Do you think they are in love with each other?), and whether it was a one-night stand (e.g. Do you think it was a one-night stand?). In addition we asked whether the two might still be in contact after 1 year (anchored at 1 = *no contact at all*, and 7 = *a lot of contact*). Furthermore we measured participants' mood with a single item (i.e. How do you feel right now?; 1 = *very bad* to 7 = *very good*).

#### Results and discussion

We summarized the two items measuring love ( $r = .81$ ) and sex ( $r = .73$ ) into two means respectively. The results were in line with our expectations. Participants primed with a low construal level interpreted the situation more in terms of sex ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) than in terms of love ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ),  $t(44) = 2.31$ ,  $p = .02$ . Participants primed with a high construal level interpreted the situation less in terms of sex ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ) than in terms of love ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ),  $t(44) = 3.17$ ,  $p = .003$ ;  $F(1,44) = 15.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .25$ , for the significant interaction in a 2(construal)  $\times$  2(interpretation) mixed-model ANOVA. Including mood as a covariate led to the same interaction as the only significant effect,  $F(1,44) = 16.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .28$ . Furthermore participants for whom a low construal level was activated assumed that the contact between the two actors after 1 year was less frequent ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ) than participants in the high construal level condition ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ),  $t(44) = 2.21$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = .65$ .

The results served as first indication that level of construal indeed guides our perception of ambiguous interpersonal situations. Yet, the manipulation we used (i.e. how versus why descriptions of events) has previously also been used in relation to subjective reports of happiness (Strack, Schwarz, & Gschneidinger, 1985). We did not find any differences in terms of affect in the present study. However, in order to avoid this potential confound a second study was conducted using a different priming manipulation.

### Study 2

In this conceptual replication, participants were primed with a different task in which they had to either infer an exemplar from a

given category, or a category from a given exemplar (low versus high level of construal; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006).

#### Method

##### Participants and design

Fifty-seven (52 females) psychology students participated, the design compared 2 level of construal (between: high, low) with 2 interpretation (within: love, sex).

##### Procedure

Adapting a version of a priming task used by Fujita et al. (2006), participants had to complete 40 sentences of the following structure "The Empire state building is an example of ...". Having to infer a higher order category from a given exemplar should prime a *high-level of construal*. In the *low-level construal* condition materials consisted of content wise similar sentences that differed in structure. Here participants had to deduct an example from a given category, such as "An example for a skyscraper is...". The remainder of the experiment was identical to Study 1.

#### Results and discussion

We again summarized the two items measuring love ( $r = .69$ ) and the two items measuring sex ( $r = .68$ ), respectively. Participants for whom a high level of construal was activated thought the couple was in love ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) than as a sexual encounter ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ),  $t(55) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .02$ . However, participants for whom a low level of construal was activated the situation was perceived more in terms of sex ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) than love ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ),  $t(55) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .057$ . The interaction was significant in a 2 (construal)  $\times$  2 (interpretation) mixed-model ANOVA,  $F(1,55) = 9.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$ . No other effects were significant, all  $F$ s  $< 1.1$ . Including mood as a covariate resulted in the same interaction,  $F(1,55) = 8.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .13$ . Furthermore, participants in the low construal condition were less likely to think that the two still see each other in 1 year ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 2.59$ ) than high construal participants, ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ),  $t(55) = 2.60$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .68$ . In short, Study 2 conceptually replicated Study 1 in that the level of construal affects the interpretation of ambiguous interpersonal situations.

### Study 3

Thus far our studies focused on an ambiguous dating context. Our model of the information processing consequences of love and sex is not limited to such contexts. Ambiguity in terms of perceptions of relationship quality (Gagné & Lydon, 2001) or relationship expectancies (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998) can also occur when relationships end. The present study examines whether level of construal also guides interpretations of ambiguous break-up situations. More specifically, we presented a scenario in which a couple had broken up and meets again at a party – we asked whether they would restart their relationship or whether they would stay single. We expect high-level construals to be linked to love, while low-level construals should lead participants to assume the dissolution to be final.

Such study can also distinguish between psychological distance and level of construal driving effects in the former studies. It is possible that high level of construal elicited thoughts about distal events and that this transfers the current situation to the distant future. Since love, involving wishes of "foreverness" (Förster et al., 2009) is more related to the distance than the sexual desire participants may have interpreted the situation as love. If distance is the mechanism, then in a break-up scenario, people primed with high level construals should think that *this* situation would stay for a longer

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