

When it hurts to think we were made for each other

July 24 2014

Aristotle said, "Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies." Poetic as it is, thinking that you and your partner were made in heaven for each other can hurt your relationship, says a new study.

Psychologists observe that people talk and think about [love](#) in apparently limitless ways but underlying such diversity are some common themes that frame how we think about relationships. For example, one popular frame considers love as perfect unity ("made for each other," "she's my other half"); in another frame, love is a journey ("look how far we've come," "we've been through all these things together"). These two ways of thinking about relationships are particularly interesting because, according to study authors social psychologists Spike W. S. Lee of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and Norbert Schwarz of the University of Southern California, they have the power to highlight or downplay the damaging effect of conflicts on [relationship](#) evaluation. Here's why. If two people were really made in heaven for each other, why should they have any conflicts?

"Our findings corroborate prior research showing that people who implicitly think of relationships as perfect unity between soulmates have worse relationships than people who implicitly think of relationships as a journey of growing and working things out," says Prof. Lee. "Apparently, different ways of talking and thinking about love relationship lead to different ways of evaluating it."

In one experiment, Profs. Lee and Schwarz had people in long-term

relationships complete a knowledge quiz that included expressions related to either unity or journey, then recall either conflicts or celebrations with their romantic partner, and finally evaluate their relationship. As predicted, recalling conflicts leads people to feel less satisfied with their relationship—but only with the unity frame in mind, not with the journey frame in mind. Recalling celebrations makes people satisfied with their relationship regardless of how they think about it.

In a two follow-up experiments, the study authors invoked the unity vs. journey frame in even subtler, more incidental ways. For example, people were asked to identify pairs of geometric shapes to form a full circle (activating unity) or draw a line that gets from point A to point B through a maze (activating journey). Such non-linguistic, merely pictorial cues were sufficient to change the way people evaluated relationships. Again, conflicts hurt relationship satisfaction with the unity frame in mind, not with the journey frame in mind.

Next time you and your partner have a conflict, as Profs. Lee and Schwarz would advise, think what you said at the altar, "I, ___, take you, ___, to be my husband/wife, 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." It's a journey. You'll feel better now, and you'll do better down the road.

The study was published in a recent issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: When it hurts to think we were made for each other (2014, July 24) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-07-when-it-hurts-to-think.html>

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