

50-word Abstract: Truth ratings appear to reflect the quality of proverbs, with pleasantness, simplicity, familiarity, and imagery ratings being secondarily important. With truth as the criterion and the other variables as predictors, a path analysis of 199 proverbs produced a good fit with the data, and measurement of quality for each proverb.

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Title:

## **A TRUTH-BASED APPROACH FOR IDENTIFYING THE BEST AND WORST PROVERBS**

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### **Problem or Major Purpose**

Proverbs are brief pithy sayings in frequent and widespread use which express a basic truth or practical precept (cf. Pickett, 1995; Gibbs & Beitel, 1995, p. 134; Honeck, 1997, p. 130; Teigen, 1986). Proverbs typically contain easily understood concepts and images that produce abstract interpretations that are applicable to many situations (Honeck, 1997, p. 130). Many people use proverbs as cognitive ideals or sources of wisdom from which they derive guidance for dealing with life's problems (Honeck, 1997, p. 130; Teigen, 1986). Proverbs are often used as informal summaries of notable events or to justify a decision. Proverbs are also used to suggest an improved way of thinking or behaving. Probably for these reasons, proverbs are pervasive in everyday communication and in the media, and pertain to such varied topics as love, friendship, work, death, and wise conduct (Gibbs & Beitel, 1995, p. 135).

### ***Some criteria for evaluating proverbs***

In this paper we consider an approach for evaluating proverbs. The above description of proverbs suggests several useful criteria, namely truth, simplicity, familiarity, and imagery. Of these, truth seems the most important, because proverbs can help people adapt to life's challenges. An untrue proverb can be misleading or damaging. Research shows that proverbs which people rate as more true tend to be rated higher in quality and to be proverbs that people would rather keep than discard (Teigen, 1986).

### *Proverbial truth and reframing*

There may be two types of truth involved in proverbs. Proverbs seem to help people to reframe life's predicaments and they do this in two ways through positive and negative reframing (Tracy, Greco, Felix, & Kilburg, in press). Positive reframes are illustrated by the proverb, "Every cloud has a silver lining." This proverb "...suggests that every difficult or depressing circumstance has some hidden consolation, some opportunity, and thus there is always reason to hope." (Panati, 1990, p. 325). Positive reframes draw positive implications from adverse circumstances (cf. "positive reappraisals," Park and Folkman, 1997, pp. 127-128). As summarized graphically in the left side of Figure 1, positive reframing implies a thought transition whereby a situation is evaluated in an improved way, that points in the positive (improved) direction.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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In contrast, there seem to be negative reframes, as illustrated by the proverb "All that glitters is not gold." Such proverbs provide helpful warnings about difficult situations, and therefore encourage proactive coping (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997, cf. "problem-focused coping"). Negative reframes involve negative thought transitions that relate to some problem which might be corrected or avoided, so that adjustment can be improved. Thus, as in the right side of Figure 1, negative reframing might be summarized diagrammatically by an arrow that initially moves negatively but ends more positively than where it began. Because they contain negative thought transitions, negative reframes should be less pleasant than positive reframes, which transition only positively. In addition, negative reframes should be more complex than positive reframes due to the shifting to negative affect then to positive affect.

Tracy, Greco, Felix, & Kilburg (in press) examined whether the distinction between positive and negative reframes applies to proverbs. Consistent with Figure 1, results showed that proverbs that had been categorized as positive reframes were later rated by college students as more pleasant, and also conceptually simpler than negative reframes. Unexpectedly, positive reframes were also more familiar than the negative reframes, even when controlling for pleasantness and complexity. Other results showed that positive and negative reframes occurred similarly often among the proverbs, and they did not differ consistently in rated truth, rated imagery arousal, or reading grade level. It was concluded, that positive and negative reframes are valid categories of proverbs, differing in terms of pleasantness, simplicity, and familiarity, but not necessarily differing in terms of reading level, imagery, or truth.

### *Rationale*

The following rationale was evaluated using a path analysis with the criterion being the rated truth of the proverbs, considered separately for positive and negative reframes. Positive and negative reframes pertain to different situations and therefore reframe status may be a moderator variable in this study.

As illustrated in Figure 2, pleasantness might be positively related to truth. We expected greater satisfaction resulting from the application of truer proverbs.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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Further, we expect that *simplicity* contributes to making a proverb more predictable and understandable, hence more pleasant. We do not expect a link between simplicity to truth, since simple proverbs could be either true or false, as well as could complex proverbs. *Reading grade* level, as measured by the Flesch-Kincaid formula might contribute to simplicity; proverbs at lower reading levels should be simpler.

*Imagery* should theoretically be positively related to simplicity, because high imagery proverbs refer to concrete objects which should be simpler compared to more abstract proverbs.

Finally, *familiarity* should be positively and directly related to truth because familiar proverbs appear more often, presumably because they are adaptively more helpful (truer). Familiarity should also contribute to pleasantness, because of the well known "mere-exposure" effect in psychology (Zajonc, 2001).

A theoretical goal of this paper was to identify the most important contributors to the truth of proverbs, and also to determine if the pattern of contribution resembled the paths illustrated. A practical goal was to scale the quality the proverbs from "worst" to "best" so that the better proverbs could be used for improved communications.

## Procedures

We used a data set containing proverbs from Tracy, Greco, Felix, & Kilburg (in press). The data set contains *imagery* and *familiarity* ratings of proverbs from introductory psychology college students in 1983 by Higbee and Millard (1983). Recently, Tracy et al. (in press) used the same proverbs because they seemed sufficiently familiar that six judges could categorize them as positive or negative reframes. Of 199 proverbs, 66 were categorized as negative reframes and 56 as positive reframes. If anyone is interested, some details of the categorization are shown in Table 1, but we won't discuss that now.

- (a) Omit this paragraph, but keep as a response to a possible question. Table 1 summarizes how well judges agreed in assigning proverbs to reframe categories. In general, reframing seemed applicable to proverbs. Only 2.5% (5) of the proverbs were categorized as not being reframes, apparently because judges considered them as conclusions or commands that did not involve a thought transition, e.g., Put on your thinking cap. Only 3% (6) of the proverbs were unfamiliar to some of the judges and could not be classified. The remaining 33% (66) also seemed to involve reframing, but categorization was ambiguous because of the varied situations to which the proverbs could be applied, e.g., History repeats itself.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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Next, college students, unaware of the reframe categorization, rated the proverbs on a seven point scale in terms of either *truth*, *simplicity*, and *pleasantness*. Figure 3 illustrates a sample page students used in rating truth.

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## Results

How true are proverbs? Figure 4 shows that they can be described as varying around a median of "somewhat true," with truth varying between very true and neutral.

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Insert Figure 4 about here  
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### *Correlations & Regression Analysis*

The intercorrelations among measures for all 122 of the positively and negatively reframed proverbs are shown in Table 2. Stepwise regression analyses resulted in Truth being predicted by Pleasantness followed by Reframe Status (positive or negative) with an adjusted  $R^2 = 0.20$  (coefficients are betas). The regression equation is shown in the lower part of Table 2. Thus, pleasant and positively reframed proverbs tended to be rated as more truthful.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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### *Path Analysis for Predictions in Figure 2*

For a more comprehensive picture, the hypothesized path model shown earlier in Figure 2 was tested for the 122 positively and negatively reframed proverbs combined, following LISREL 8.51 (see also Jöreskog, K. G., Sörbom, D., Du Toit, S., & Du Toit, M., 1999). Unfortunately, the model shown in Figure 2 did not fit the data.

### *Path Analysis for an Accidental Model*

Prior to doing the preceding path analyses, the authors had communicated the underlying theory incorrectly, which by accident, resulted in a path structure (see Figure 5) which turned out to fit the data. We report these results here to suggest that the data can be potentially modeled to achieve a good fit, provided the researcher can find an a priori basis for the path diagram shown in Figure 5, and that the path model is verified on a new collection of data.

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Insert Figure 5 about here  
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With negative and positive reframes combined, all the path coefficients were statistically significant, and the statistical indices shown in Figure 5 indicate a good fit with the data. A path from Flesch-Kincaid reading to Simplicity is not included level, because the model becomes unacceptable, for reasons that will be given in the discussion.

In a follow-up analysis, the positively and negatively reframed proverbs were examined separately in a multigroup analysis, to see if the same model was a good fit to both sets of

proverbs. Results indicated that it is reasonable to combine the positive and negative reframes. In summary, the model in Figure 5 indicates that simple, familiar proverbs with less imagery are rated as more pleasant. Pleasant and simple proverbs are rated as more truthful.

### *Indexing the Truth of Proverbs*

One goal of this paper was to create an index for ordering proverbs from best to worst. Using truth as the criterion, along with other characteristics of proverbs that contribute to Truth, we used the regression equation presented above in Table 2:

$$\text{Predicted Truth} = 2.91 + .42 (\text{Pleasantness}) - .24 (\text{Reframe})$$

The proverbs were then sorted in terms of predicted truth in ascending order from least true to most true. This sorting was done separately for the negative and for the positive reframes, which pertain to different types of situations. Appendix A shows the 5 worst and the 5 best negative reframes. Also shown are the 5 worst and the 5 best positive reframes.

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Insert Appendix A about here  
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To illustrate, if you wanted to give someone a helpful warning, in most situations you would avoid the relatively untrue saying: "Give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself." Instead, you might better advise with the truer, "Better to be safe than sorry."

For positive reframes, which are used for comforting someone, you generally would not say: "There's more than one way to skin a cat." Instead, perhaps one of the 5 most true positive reframes would be appropriate. The five reframes at the bottom of Appendix A are very close in predicted truth.

### **Conclusions & Implications**

First, the level of truth in proverbs is not nearly as high as definitions of proverbs might suggest. Rather than being extremely true, proverbs are closer to being somewhat true. Nevertheless, truth values in this study were from college students who are presumably expert judges, having been exposed to these proverbs for many years.

If *truth* is accepted as the major criterion for evaluating proverbs, two factors emerge from step-wise regression analysis predicting truth, specifically, *pleasantness*, and *reframe status* (positive or negative). Neither of these appear to have been stressed in previous definitions or discussions of proverbs. With pleasantness and reframe in the regression analysis, usual characteristics of proverbs fade in importance, specifically, *simplicity*, *familiarity*, and *imagery*.

Obviously the failure of our hypothesized path model indicates that there is much that we don't know about proverbs. One result seems clear in retrospect, however. Reading grade level should not be included in regression models involving proverbs and college students. The reason is that reading level of these proverbs is near the 3rd grade level, which makes reading grade level irrelevant to college students.

The approach taken in this study seems worth pursuing. This approach includes considering truth as a criterion of proverbs, and attempting to find suitable predictor variables, such as pleasantness and reframe status. Differentiating the best from the worst proverbs therefore becomes possible. Finally, more specific predictors can be tested using LISREL to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses about path structures.

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