

REFRAMING WITHIN PROVERBS

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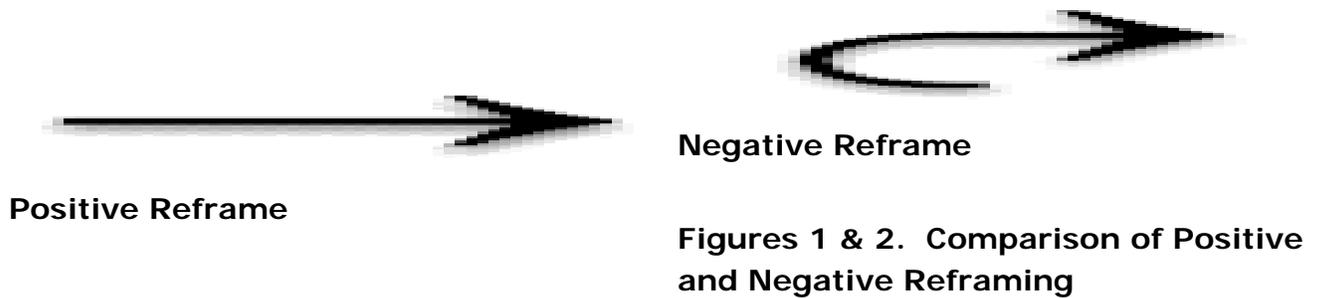
Abstract

For Condor web site. Many proverbs seem to convey wisdom because they help people reframe and adjust to life's predicaments. Positive reframes, such as Every cloud has a silver lining, often draw positive implications from adverse circumstances (cf., "gain frames," "positive reappraisals," "emotion-focused coping", "dispositional optimism"). In contrast, negative reframes, such as All that glitters is not gold, provide helpful warnings about difficult situations, and therefore encourage proactive coping (cf. "problem-focused coping," "defensive pessimism"). Six judges evaluated 199 proverbs and categorized most of them as positive or negative reframes. (For some proverbs judges disagreed on the reframe category because they interpreted the proverb as relevant to different situations). Results showed that those proverbs categorized as positive versus negative reframes were rated by college students as more pleasant, conceptually simpler, and more familiar. Other results showed that positive and negative reframes occurred similarly often among the proverbs, and that positive and negative reframes did not differ consistently in rated truth, imagery arousal, or reading grade level. A later version of this paper appears in: Tracy, R. J., Greco, N., Felix, E., & Kilburg, D. F., III. (2003). Reframing and wisdom within proverbs. Imagination, Cognition, and Personality, 22(2), pp. 117-162.

- Proverbs, such as, Every cloud has a silver lining, are brief pithy sayings in frequent and widespread use that express a basic truth or practical precept (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000)
- In this paper we argue that many proverbs convey wisdom because they help people to reframe important life experiences and elegantly express those reframes to others.

Positive Reframing

- A proverb such as Every cloud has a silver lining, could be called a positive reframe because it redirects a person's attention towards a positive aspect or implication of some situation.
- The term, **positive reframe** (or "gain frame" or "positive reappraisal") implies a thought transition whereby a situation is evaluated in an improved way, as suggested by the top arrow in Figure 1, that symbolically points in the positive (improved) direction.



- Whether a phrase is regarded as a reframe depends upon how a person typically instantiates the phrase.

Illustrations of Positive Reframes which are not Proverbs

- Reframing can help people cope with irreversible situations, e.g., many cemetery gravestones show that death has been reframed as resting in peace
- Because positive reframing can alleviate discomfort, it is commonly used by psychotherapists (e.g. J. Beck & Strong, 1982)
- Positive reframing may contribute to creativity by enabling people to withstand discouragement (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995, Ch. 8).

Negative reframing

- In contrast to positive reframes, there appear to be negative reframes, illustrated by the proverb, All that glitters is not gold.
- We define **negative reframes** (or “loss frames”) as helpful warnings or admonitions about situations that could get worse.

Negative versus positive reframes

- Positive reframes involve a thought transition to a positive, improved way of thinking; while negative reframes also involve an improved thought transition, but only after a negative, correctable issue is first considered.
- Thus, in addition to containing more negative affect, negative reframes seem to be more informationally complex than positive reframes. Figures 1 & 2 illustrate these two differences between negative and positive reframes.
- But negative reframes could be complex partly due to their inherent negativity *apart from being more informationally complex*.

Other Illustrations of Negative Reframing

- The concept of negative reframing appears in the psychological literature, but the term “negative reframing” has not been used.
- Negative reframing seems involved in proactive coping which refers to ways that people attempt to offset or eliminate potential stressors before they develop (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997)
- Cognitive psychotherapists typically encourage clients to identify and challenge dysfunctional thoughts in order that more functional thoughts may be substituted (Beck, 1995).

Other issues

- Some proverbs might be “either” reframes, in the sense that they involve either positive or negative thought transitions, depending on the situational context, e.g., Birds of a feather flock together.
- Positive and negative reframing may be used in ways that compliment each other.

Rationale

- This research investigated whether proverbs categorized as positive reframes differed from proverbs categorized as negative reframes.
- We obtained 203 familiar proverbs from a paper by Higbee and Millard (1983), which also contained familiarity and visual imagery ratings for each proverb.
- In Phase 1, of this study, judges categorized the proverbs according to the type of reframe (positive, negative, “either”, or not a reframe).
- In Phase 2, students who were unaware of reframe category of proverbs rated the proverbs in terms of Pleasantness, Simplicity, Truth, Familiarity, and Imagery. We also calculated the Flesch-Kincaid grade level for each proverb. We then analyzed each of these measures individually, while using the remaining measures as covariates, to test whether positive reframes would be rated higher than negative reframes.

Phase 1: Categorizing Proverbs as Reframes

Method

- Each of six judges read a different, randomly ordered listing of the proverbs. Each proverb was printed alone, unaccompanied by any situational context. This required judges to instantiate each proverb by thinking of their own situation where the proverb could be applied.

Results and Discussion

- **Table 1** Extent of Agreement between Judges in Categorizing Proverbs as Reframes
- The data seem to support a distinction between negative and positive reframes.

Phase 2: Comparing Positive and Negative Reframes on Various Ratings

- Familiarity and Imagery ratings were obtained from 101 university students who participated in Higbee and Millard’s 1983 study. Pleasantness, Simplicity, and Truth ratings were obtained from a sample of 177 DePaul students.

Reliability assessment and Descriptive Statistics

- Tables 2, 3, and 4 omitted from presentation due to time constraints.

MANOVA and Logistic Regression

- **Figure 3** — Manova results: Positive reframes higher than negative reframes

Analysis of Covariance for the dependent variables

- Pleasantness. As expected, positive reframes were more pleasant than negative reframes
- Simplicity. As predicted, results showed that positive reframes were simpler than negative reframes

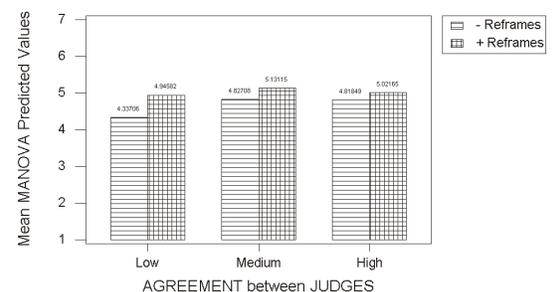


Figure 3. Multivariate differences between positive and negative reframes and degree of agreement between judges.

- **Truth**. Positive reframes were higher in truth than negative reframes, but results were marginally significant.
- **Figure 4 — Familiarity**. Positive reframes were more familiar than negative reframes
- Further, Agreement between Judges was significant
- **Figure 5 — Imagery**. Results for Imagery showed an unexpected interaction involving Reframe X Agreement between Judges
- **Flesch-Kincaid grade levels**. No results were significant.

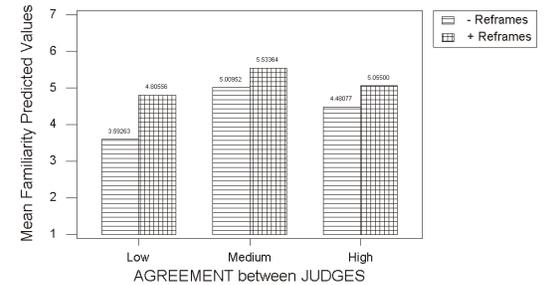


Figure 4. Familiarity as a function of type of reframe and agreement between judges.

SUMMARY & DISCUSSION

- The distinction between negative and positive reframing seems to apply to proverbs.
- Further, our finding of superiority of positive over negative reframes within proverbs in terms of pleasantness, simplicity, and familiarity suggests that positive reframes might also be more effective than negative reframes in other areas of psychology.

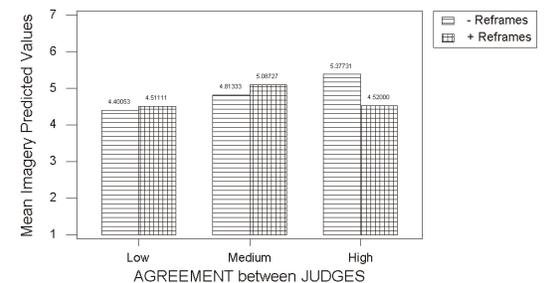


Figure 5. Imagery as a function of type of reframe and agreement between judges.

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Table 1 Extent of Agreement between Judges in Categorizing Proverbs as Reframes

No. of Judges Agreeing	Reframe Category						TOTAL
	Negative	Positive	Either	Not a Reframe	Unfamiliar Proverb	Tie	
six	<u>11</u>	<u>4</u> ¹	<u>1</u>	0	0	0	16
five	<u>15</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>3</u>	0	0	0	30
four	<u>21</u> ²	<u>22</u>	<u>7</u>	0	3	0	53
three	<u>19</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>16</u>	5	1	12	70
two	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>	0	2	24	30
TOTAL	66	56	30	5	6	36	199

Note. Table columns show the possible reframe categories and the rows show the number of judges who agreed how they categorized the proverbs. Double underlines in the table indicate proverbs which were clearly defined because a majority of the six judges agreed. Single underlines represent lower inter-judge agreement. Footnotes illustrate a proverb and how each judge categorized it. Only Negative and Positive reframes were analyzed in Phase 2.

- ¹ All's well that ends well. (1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1. Six positive ones means that all six judges categorized this proverb as a positive reframe.)
- ² You can't teach an old dog new tricks. (-1, -1, -1, -1, 0, Not reframe. Four judges categorized this proverb as a negative reframe. One judge categorized it as an "either" reframe; one considered it not to be a reframe at all.)

Table 2 The Relationship between Type of Reframe and Negativity

Type of Reframe	Existence of Negativity	
	Absent	Present
Negative	17 (26%)	49 (74%)
Positive	45 (80%)	11 (20%)

Note. Negativity was defined as the occurrence of cautionary or negative terminology that included words such as: cannot, don't, never, no, etc.