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# Into The Woods: Introducing the Couples Metaphoric Interview Matrices

Sarah Eckstein,<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Straub,<sup>2</sup> Nicole Russo<sup>3</sup> and Daniel Eckstein<sup>4,5</sup>

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## Abstract

Metaphors are creative ways of drawing comparisons. Metaphors are also a way of exploring relationship role perceptions. The authors describe how to use the six slices of a relationship metaphoric pie to explore and to strengthen relationships within couples. Metaphor use in everyday language, the arts, and case examples are provided. You as a couple are invited to complete your own Couples Metaphoric Interview Matrices. The article concludes with additional role perception activities from previous “for couples” columns in *the Family Journal*.

## Keywords

metaphors, couples, couples communication, role perceptions

A human’s ability to speak is one of the defining characteristics of our species. We are able to communicate our needs, tell witty jokes, comfort each other in times of hardship, and to compile words in such a beautiful manner that just listening brings tears to your eyes. Beyond mere words, however, lie metaphors. One’s ability to empathize with Romeo as he finds his poisoned loved one is enhanced exponentially due to the images that arise from his graceful use of wordplay in the following passage from Shakespeare:

Death, that hath suck’d the honey of thy breath,  
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty:  
Thou art not conquer’d; beauty’s ensign yet  
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,  
And death’s pale flag is not advanced there.  
(Romeo and Juliet, Act 5, Scene 3)

The potential for genuine expression of one’s inner experience can be enhanced through the use of complex message expression in metaphorical manners. As Romeo demonstrated above, this can be used for the excitement of poignant emotions in a theatrical production, but also, this can be practiced by couples in everyday life as they use metaphors to enhance mutual understanding.

Our article begins with an introduction to the use of metaphors in interpersonal relationships, followed by its inspiration, Steven Sondheim’s Broadway musical *Into the Woods* (1987). Six specific types of metaphors will then be identified. Hopefully you as a couple may gain knowledge regarding the creative value of metaphors. You will also be offered an opportunity to complete an inventory of your own personal arsenal of metaphors that you have compiled throughout your interpersonal relationships in life.

## Literature Review of Couples’ Use of Metaphors

Relationship metaphors are often used within the media and are usually remembered long after watching the movie. They work as visual synopses because they are remembered for their story content and emotional influence (Sijill, 2011). Two noteworthy examples for the coauthors include the following two classic films *Annie Hall* (1977) and *When Harry Met Sally ...* (1989), in which relationship metaphors are used.

In the Woody Allen movie, *Annie Hall* exemplifies metaphors within an interpersonal relationship. The movie involves Alvy Singer and *Annie Hall*. In the course of the film, they both fall in love but later leave one another. Alvy Singer describes their relationship as “A relationship, I think, is like a shark. You know? It has to constantly move forward or it dies. And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark” (*Annie Hall*, 1977). The metaphor of a dead shark is a striking way to describe the end of a relationship. A similar way of viewing the end of a relationship could also be expressed as “by the end of our ‘discussion,’ she was Muhammad Ali moving off the ropes and I was George Foreman in the eighth round—all the

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punches thrown and about to receive a knockout blow” (Richardson, 2009).

In the movie *When Harry Met Sally* . . . two young intellectuals meet when sharing a car ride from the University of Chicago to New York City after graduation. Five years later, they meet again on a plane flight. Both times, they discuss why men and women cannot be friends and, upon the arrival of their destination, they go their separate ways. Eventually, they meet again and decide they are, in fact, friends. They eventually fall in love and marry. This is the scene when Harry realizes he loves Sally (Ephron & Reiner, 1989):

Harry: I've been doing a lot of thinking, and the thing is, I love you.  
 Sally: What?  
 Harry: I love you.  
 Sally: How do you expect me to respond to this?  
 Harry: How about, you love me too.  
 Sally: How about, I'm leaving.

Many of us can identify with this situation—being taken by surprise by what our partner is feeling or saying. There are often different perspectives of how each partner views the nature of the relationship. As the examples from *Annie Hall* and *When Harry Met Sally* demonstrate, a metaphor is a figure of speech implying one idea is comparable to another (Nystul, 2006). Metaphors occur within our daily conversations particularly when expressing emotions (Kopp & Eckstein, 2004). “We are at the crossroads,” “I cannot live without her,” and “We were made for each other” are three metaphors that are often used by individuals to describe their romantic relationship. They express something that is difficult or impossible to literally describe. In general, they serve to enumerate problems and in turn make them controllable. A great deal of information and emotion is communicated with the use of one word or a phrase.

According to Eckstein and Sarnoff (2007), relationships can be described by using the following four metaphors: the As and Hs of Relationships; Relationship as a Three-legged Sack Race; Walls and Windows; and Cracking the Shell. The As and Hs of relationships refer simply to the construct of the letters. The A indicates that one partner is relying heavily on the other. Eventually the lines collapse due to the continuous pressure, which results in the termination of the relationship. The H indicates two strong independent partners that have a linking equal strength connection.

The three-legged sack race illustrates a couple's type of attachment style. Does each partner have one leg in and one leg out indicating a mutually supported/depended relationship or are all four legs out indicating disengagement? The inside two legs in the sack and the outside two legs that are separate are a suggested ideal balance of consecutiveness and independence.

Walls and windows mean just that—a joint wall is formed against the problem by you and your partner and the window provides the opening to reestablish the trust between the two of you. Putting a wall between you and another relationship and/or between you and an addiction are two examples.

Cracking the shell refers to carrying baggage from past relationships into your present relationship. Men might become defensive by not allowing true intimacy into their hearts. Over generalizing from a past relationship to a present one has often been characterized with the single metaphoric image of baggage.

Within the context of a relationship, metaphors are often used to describe love, a problem, or to clarify our roles within the relationship. Using a metaphor to describe love can be done in several ways: as a journey, a physical force, a nutrient, unity, as heat, as a sport, and as a disease (Baxter, 2003). Our basic understanding of each partner's role within the relationship originates from our worldviews—how we see and understand the world around us.

The factors that influence our worldview are often family, culture, and society. We first learn how to view and understand our environment from our parents who teach us the social norms and behaviors that are accepted or not accepted by our society. These behaviors can be associated into metaphors pertaining to our adult relationships, such as “men are the breadwinners” and “women are the caretakers.” As we grow older, our values and beliefs are impacted by our society, especially during the teenage years, and follow us into adulthood. Within all of our relationships, we attempt to define and clarify our roles. Role clarification involves each of us identifying our expectations associated with our partner, such as the traditional view of the husband being the monetary provider or the wife being the caretaker of the children.

In a recent couples counseling session, coauthor Daniel Eckstein confronted a man who had decided it was his job description to solve his wife's stated comment that “I'm not happy here on Saba.” His role perception was that when she stated a problem, it was his job to fix it. The wife smiled and admitted that she was in fact “a bit of a princess and that she also felt it was ‘his job’ to fix her problems.” Her stated problem had magically been shifted onto him. Both of them, during their more than 40 years of marriage, had mutually accepted this as how each of them behaved in the relationship. A metaphoric image was also used to make the teaching point. If one comes along and sees a baby chicken struggling to open the egg in which it is encased and decides to help the chick by opening the egg for it, that animal will in fact die because the pectoral muscles necessary were not developed. So, too, psychological muscles are not developed when one partner does for the other what he or she can and needs to do for optimal self-worth.

Understanding and using metaphors within your relationship can assist you in building your concept of your marriage, working through marital problems and exploring central themes within the relationship (Withrow, n.d). Metaphors have the potential solutions to your problems (Kopp, 1995). Metaphors can assist you as a couple in understanding the impact, which your relationship problems have on your marriage and family. They can assist you in changing your unhealthy interaction to a healthier one. Linking a metaphor to the problem within your relationship such as “it's a two way street” can assist you in understanding and processing your relational and

family dynamics. These factors include the individual freedom and belonging, self and system, vulnerability and self-protection, harmony and discord, and the influence of their family of origin (Withrow, n.d.). Addressing these areas within your relationship can assist you in building a solid foundation and connection with your partner.

## Into the Woods

Steven Sondheim and cowriter Jack Lapine's Tony Award winning 1987 Broadway musical, *Into the Woods*, brilliantly takes the audience through a metaphoric journey. The musical production uses familiar Brothers Grimm fairy tales to parallel life's quests, wishes, and challenges of finding happiness, love, and coping with fear and the unknowns—the woods of life (Humphrys, n.d.). The musical production is divided by the unfolding of the story lines that take place stage left, stage right, and center stage. Metaphorically, for the purposes of this article, the opening scene represents the relationship between couples. Each of you has your own personal story from your family of origin.

A narrator begins the first scene of Act I by outlining the characters' stories and their quests and wishes. The first half of the play figuratively represents stage left and stage right where each individual story is told. The childless Baker and his wife, who are the catalysts of the story, want to reverse the curse placed upon them so that they can have a child (Abernathy, 2004). Cinderella is introduced as a fair maiden who wishes to go to the ball (Humphrys, n.d.). Jack, from *Jack in the Beanstalk*, is introduced as a sad young lad who wishes his cow would produce milk. Little Red Riding Hood makes a trip to visit her sick grandmother and survives a wolf attack (Humphrys, n.d.). A witch, who stole Rapunzel from the Baker's parents a long time ago, escapes from being trapped in the cottage next door to the Baker's house. The witch told the Baker and his wife that if they bring four ingredients to her, she would make a potion to undo the spell. The four ingredients are (a) a cow as white as milk, (b) a cape as red as blood, (c) hair as yellow as corn, and (d) a slipper as pure as gold (Flatow, n.d.). These ingredients signify your needs and wants of finding a partner, developing a relationship, and sharing your life. Each character enters the woods to begin his or her journey in pursuit of finding happiness with a partner.

Center stage represents where two individuals meet to share his or her fairy tale or family-of-origin story. The humor of the production and the symbolic hell that breaks loose occurs when each fairy tale character crosses over into the story line of the other characters in the woods at center stage. Through the turbulent transition between Act I and Act II, the characters become intertwined and each story becomes blended as part of this exploration.

A similar blending process occurs for many couples. The path into the woods is filled with twists and turns, illustrating the relationship dilemmas that each character had to face to fulfill his or her wishes (Flatow, n.d.). Through the relational expedition, couples begin a crossing-over process marked by discovery and collaboration (Baxter, 2003). The dating process is a type of convergence that occurs in the woods where you

enter the world of your partner and where your partner enters your world. You and your partner begin to explore each other's stories as they were prior to meeting. The characters in your life such as family members, cousins, friends, and in-laws become part of the overall blending process.

The seemingly living happily ever after is interrupted during Act II when each character encounters a new relationship crisis. Couples encounter on-going moments, challenges, and situations that require adjustment to maintain a healthy balanced working relationship. Change and discovery occur along the relational trip at times in which detours or alternative paths must be flexibly taken (Baxter, 2003). The process of joining your partner at center stage represents the grand finale where the characters have created their united story.

The audience is encouraged to appreciate that there are three parts in a relationship, "you, me, and it" (Baxter, 2003) or acts at stage left, stage right, and center stage. These acts reflect your relational choices embedded in a rotating interconnected wheel of your metaphoric self-image in your relationship, your image of others, and approach to life. Not only does each of you walk from one part of life's stage into the other story line of your partner's but also, ideally, the two of you combine your stories into a united grand finale.

We now invite you to commence your journey into the woods. Prior to completing your own matrix, please reference the graphic demonstration of the six-specific categories of metaphors as suggested by Kopp and Eckstein (2004). As you review the categories, begin to think about your own metaphoric images (e.g., self-image, relational images, and life situation images).

## Six Categories of Metaphors

There are six specific types of metaphors that are grouped into the following categories: (a) metaphors representing one's understanding of one's own self-image without the context of their relationship; (b) one's image of self within the context of their relationships; (c) one's understanding of self and situations; (d) one's image of others; (e) one's image of life situations; and (f) one's understanding of self and their interactions with others (Kopp & Eckstein, 2004). In order to clarify how to use the matrix, there is an introduction to each of the six categories of metaphors which you yourself will be creating in your own matrix:

Category 1: My self-image, regardless of relationship context *I see myself as . . .*

Possible examples for a Category 1 metaphor could be:

- I see myself as a chess piece trying to figure out my next move.
- I see myself as a ball waiting for someone to catch me.
- I see myself as a rock that is strong and independent.
- I see myself as a hammer and keep beating myself up.
- I see myself as an endless mirror with so many roles to fulfill.
- I see myself as a sand dollar with hidden treasures.
- I see myself as a seed starving for water, light, and fertilization.

“I see myself as the world’s most dangerous predator. Everything about me invites you in. My voice, my face, even my smell. As if I would need any of that. As if you could outrun me. As if you could fight me off” (Edward Cullen, *Twilight*).

Category 2: My self-image within the context of our relationship *I am like a . . .*

Possible examples for a Category 2 metaphor could be:

I am like a Facebook member, signing in and out whenever it is convenient for me and sometimes making private information too public.

I am like grass that insists on growing through the tiny cracks allowed by hard cement even though growing in the lawn with all the other grass would be much less challenging.

Category 3: My self-image regarding a problem in our relationship *With respect to \_\_\_ I see myself as . . .*

The following excerpt from *When Harry Met Sally* personifies the third type of metaphor:

Harry Burns: There are two kinds of women: high maintenance and low maintenance.

Sally Albright: Which one am I?

Harry Burns: You’re the worst kind; you’re high maintenance but you think you’re low maintenance.

Sally Albright: I don’t see that.

Harry Burns: You don’t see that? Waiter, I’ll begin with a house salad, but I don’t want the regular dressing. I’ll have the balsamic vinegar and oil, but on the side. And then the salmon with the mustard sauce, but I want the mustard sauce on the side. “On the side” is a very big thing for you.

Sally Albright: Well, I just want it the way I want it.

Harry Burns: I know; high maintenance.

(Ephron & Reiner, *When Harry Met Sally . . .*)

This demonstrates how your self-view can differ greatly from how your partner views you and consequentially, misunderstandings can occur. In this case, Sally Albright’s metaphor could possibly say “With respect to my level of high or low maintenance I see myself as a sure-footed mountain goat expertly choosing which rocks to spring from and which rocks to dismiss on my bounding journey through the hills.” If Harry were to create a Category 3 metaphor for Sally he might quite divergently state that “With respect to her level of high or low maintenance I see Sally as a member of a jury, always needing mountains of evidence to inform her judgment about things being completely right or wrong.” In completing the forthcoming matrix, notice how your point of view might differ from those of other significant people in your life. Have these differences in perspective ever caused suffering in your relationships?

Category 4. My image of this person *My parent/role model/partner is like . . .*

Possible examples for a Category 4 metaphor could be:

My partner is like an express train that blows by many stops.  
My partner is like a green giant always there looking over and protecting me.

My mother is like a momma bear.

My grandfather is like a wise old owl that provides that is full of insight and wisdom.

Category 5. My image of a general life situation (work, injury, retirement) impacting our relationship. *With respect to our life situation is like . . .*

Possible examples for a Category 5 metaphor could be:

With respect to motherhood, it’s like a roller coaster with thrilling and scary ups, down, twists, and turns.

With respect to work, it’s like a ladder because I’m climbing to the top.

With respect to true love, it is like a good pair of socks, it takes two, and they’ve gotta match (Richardson, 2009).

With respect to family dinners, they are like landscapes a thousand acres per human heart; they erode but endure all weathers (Richardson, 2009).

With respect to relationships, don’t smother each other and let the sunlight in.

With respect to illness, it’s like a wave, you just have to ride it out.

Category 6: My image of our relationship *I consider our relationship to be like...*

Possible examples for a Category 6 metaphor could be:

I consider it to be like a machine that needs routine maintenance (Baxter, 2003).

I consider it to be like a computer that needs periodic upgrades.

I consider it to be like a taming a lion where I am trying to constantly control others around me.

I consider it to be like a symphony where each instrument is vital to create the harmony.

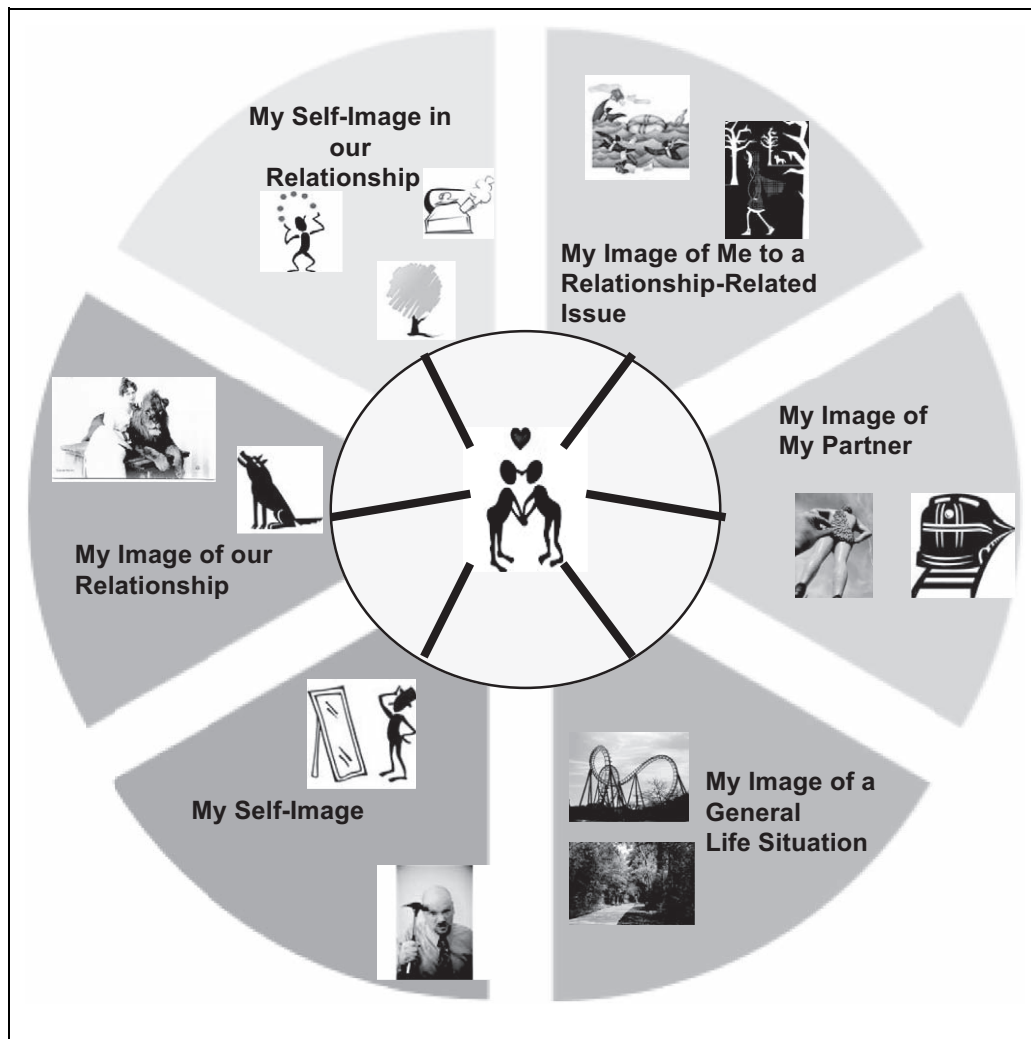
I consider it to be like a war where you win and lose battles.

I consider it to be like an adventure with each new trip is an opportunity to discover new feelings and experiences.

I consider it to be like the four seasons where each transition requires change to adjust to the weather.

Relationship metaphors like those presented in the six categories may be found at <http://www.metaphorsandsimiles.com/relationships/metaphors-analogies-similes.aspx>, <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1368/Relationship-Metaphors-Metaphors-Used-by-Relationship-Parties.html>, or <http://www.xamuel.com/10-metaphors-for-love/>

The six types of relationship metaphors can be presented visually in the following chart, Six Slices of a Metaphor Relationship Pie, created by coauthor Nicole Russo (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Six slices of relationship metaphoric pie. Adopted from Richard Kopp and Daniel Eckstein, Using early memory metaphors and client-generated metaphors in Adlerian therapy, *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 60(2), 163–174.

### Instructions for Completing the Couples Metaphoric Interview Matrices (CMIM)

Now it is time for you to fill out the matrix with your own life information. The horizontal axis of the matrix includes the following three areas of focus for each of you individually: (a) your relationship with one of your parents or parent equivalent; (b) one of your previous romantic partners; and (c) your current romantic partner.

Each of you will separately complete all of the boxes except the final box, titled Couples Collaborative Metaphor. In this final box, you and your romantic partner will work together to form a new metaphor that personifies your relationship currently. To gain the full benefit from this exercise, also take a minute to reflect on patterns you see in the metaphors you created.

After each of you has created your own matrix, interview your partner on what has been written in each box. Not all boxes need to be completed, just complete the ones that are relevant to you. Notice any insight that was gained and, if you are so inclined, continue to explore your interpersonal

relationships in other exercises, which we reference in the conclusion of this article. The first two matrices are for you and your partner to complete (Figure 2).

### Conclusion

Now that you and your partner have woven the metaphorical tapestry together, take a moment to reflect on patterns you noticed, emotions which were aroused, and thoughts that passed through your mind during this activity. Did you and your partner match with your metaphors of one another? Were there any surprises? What did you learn from this exercise?

Couples who completed this matrix report that they achieved greater awareness of their priorities in terms of what they value in a partner. They became more grateful for the positivity they re-experienced through this creative outlet, and more appreciative that they are no longer in a relationship with a previous partner who treated them more like target practice and less like a precious jewel. Some participants noticed trends

<b>Couple Metaphor Interview Matrix (CMIM), Partner A</b>			
My personal self-image in life, regardless of our relationship <i>I see myself as...</i>			
	<b>My mom, dad, or parental figure</b>	<b>One of my previous romantic partners</b>	<b>Our current relationship</b>
My self-image within the context of our relationship <i>I am like a....</i>			
My self-image regarding a problem in our relationship <i>With respect to ___ I see myself as...</i>			
My image of this person <i>My parent/role model/partner is like...</i>			
My image of a general life situation (work, injury, retirement) impacting our relationship <i>With respect to ___ our life situation is like...</i>			
My image of our relationship <i>I consider our relationship to be like...</i>			
<b>Couples Collaborated Metaphor</b> Our relationship is like...			
<b>Couple Metaphor Interview Matrix (CMIM), Partner B</b>			
My personal self-image in life, regardless of our relationship <i>I see myself as...</i>			
	<b>My mom, dad, or parental figure</b>	<b>One of my previous romantic partners</b>	<b>My current romantic partner</b>
My self-image within the context of our relationship <i>I am like a....</i>			
My self-image regarding a problem in our relationship <i>With respect to ___ I see myself as...</i>			
My image of this person <i>My parent/role model/partner is like...</i>			
My image of a general life situation (work, injury, retirement) impacting our relationship <i>With respect to ___ our life situation is like...</i>			
My image of our relationship <i>I consider our relationship to be like...</i>			
<b>Couples Collaborated Metaphor</b> Our relationship is like...			

The following four matrices are examples for you to reference if you'd like to see what other couples have created  
**Couple Metaphor Interview Matrix (CMIM)**

My personal self-image in life, regardless of our relationship <i>I see myself as...</i>	A plant growing in the shade bound in by limitations.		
	<b>My mom, dad, or parental figure</b>	<b>One of my previous romantic partners</b>	<b>My current romantic partner</b>
My self-image within the context of our relationship <i>I am like a....</i>	A super star who can be looked up to and bragged about	A steadfast friend & loyal confidant	A loving gyroscope adjusting to directional changes in a caring, supportive way
My self-image regarding a problem in our relationship <i>With respect to ___ I see myself as...</i>	Emotional Expressiveness: I am a fencepost with wraps of Velcro facing a maelstrom of emotional expressiveness deciding which pieces of debris rightfully deserve to stick to me & which ones rightfully deserve to pass on by.	Child-rearing attitudes: I am solid in our united position, like two soldiers in WWI trench warfare, shoulder to shoulder and covering one another's back against the assault	Finances: I am caught in a tornado of spending without the anchors of a savings plan or a budget
My image of this person <i>My parent/role model/ partner is like...</i>	A tire that continually goes flat	A quiet pond in a serene setting. Inviting, honest, safe	An artist's marble statue, formed with perfect stone, exuding passion, honesty, & fire
My image of a general life situation (work, injury, retirement) impacting our relationship <i>With respect to ___ our life situation is like...</i>	My emotional safety & freedom; it's as if I need to migrate afar, like a migratory bird	With respect to teamwork and goals, I was like one of two horses running in the races together	With respect to communication & openness, I am like a flower, eager to be blooming under the right conditions
My image of our relationship <i>I consider our relationship to be like...</i>	A puppy trying to understand his masters' moods & instructions, & anticipating the masters' behaviors.	A hand in a glove	A seafarer encountering new adventures, new discoveries, & new hazards each new day
<b>Couples Collaborated Metaphor</b> <b>Our relationship is like...</b>	Bread dough that combines a mixture of ingredients which have been kneaded, beaten down, allowed to rise, and baked to a golden loaf of love.		

**Couple Metaphor Interview Matrix (CMIM)**

My personal self-image in life, regardless of our relationship <i>I see myself as...</i>	A survivor of wars		
	<b>My mom, dad, or parental figure</b>	<b>One of my previous romantic partners</b>	<b>My current romantic partner</b>
My self-image within the context of our relationship <i>I am like a....</i>	Traveler in a new land leaving the motherland behind	A phoenix, I rose transformed	A willow, strong but can bend
My self-image regarding a problem in our relationship <i>With respect to ___ I see myself as...</i>	Acceptance; a window	Self worth; a tree fully grown	Anger; a peaceful warrior
My image of this person <i>My parent/role model/ partner is like...</i>	A blind heart	A high wall hiding what is behind it	Balls, that sometimes bounce off each other, with each other, and on their own
My image of a general life situation (work, injury, retirement) impacting our relationship <i>With respect to ___ our life situation is like...</i>	My grandmother; a warm bed on a dark night	Dating; banging my head on a wall	Retirement; falling off the map
My image of our relationship <i>I consider our relationship to be like...</i>	Emotional tai chi, embracing what is and moving so as to not be impacted.	A rollercoaster of ups, downs, and screams	A dance
<b>Couples Collaborated Metaphor</b> <b>Our relationship is like...</b>	Bread dough that combines a mixture of ingredients which have been kneaded, beaten down, allowed to rise, and baked to a golden loaf of love.		



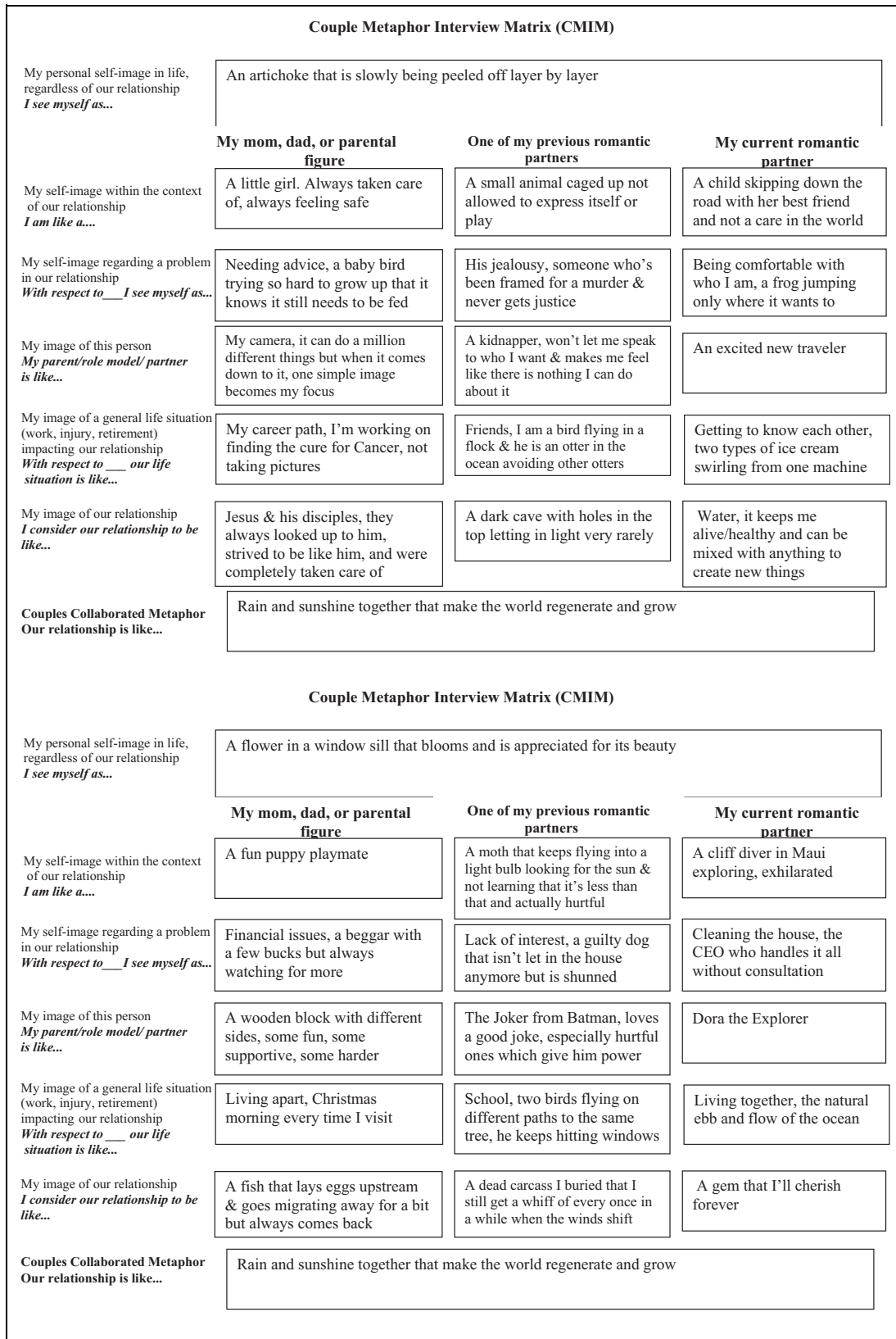


Figure 2. Couples Metaphoric Interview Matrices (CMIM).

in how easily they feel extreme emotions for others such as love and hate. The implications of these trends can therapeutically guide relationship goals for our future.

Not only was this activity designed to stimulate your ideas regarding your past relationships, it was also aimed at guiding you and your partner in a creative collaborative process. What were you and your partner's reactions to creating the final new metaphor together? What facilitates team work? We hope that through this process you will have gained insight into your relational patterns and have further expanded upon your ability to work together with others.

If you are interested in completing other insight-driven activities such as this, here are five additional "for couples" *Family Journal* columns focusing on personal and partner role perceptions: Kirk, Eckstein, Serres, and Helms (2007); Eckstein, Clement, and Fierro (2006); Eckstein and Morrison (2000); Eckstein and Axford (2000); and Eckstein, Levanthal, Bentley, and Kelley (2000).

We hope that through the work you have completed in this process, you have been able to genuinely access your emotions and cognitions regarding some of the significant relationships you have experienced in your life so far. As you continue to walk through the metaphorical woods of life, we encourage you to remember the lessons imparted upon you by the characters of Steven Sondheim's musical: Relationships include compromise, adaptability, patience, and of course love.

## Summary

The purpose of this article has been to introduce six specific ways that your relationship can be expressed in metaphoric form. The authors have created the CMIM as a visual way of briefly describing each of your own metaphors. An integrative activity of creating a new metaphoric way of describing your current partnership concludes the activity.

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