

Figurative production in a computer-mediated discussion forum: Metaphors about relationship abuse

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Abstract:

When people undergo traumatic events, they frequently turn to metaphor in an attempt to make what might initially seem indescribable into something comprehensible to others, and/or to help themselves reach a clearer understanding of what has happened to them. This investigation explores such metaphorical language produced in computer-mediated discourse by survivors of relationship abuse to communicate about various aspects of their experience, thus shedding light on a traditionally “taboo” subject that many people find difficult to broach. The analysis first explores the ways survivors “frame” their experience through a particular source domain, and then looks at the various source domain “scenarios” that are drawn upon to elaborate various particular salient details of the abuse. The chapter thus builds upon established theories about metaphorical frames and scenarios to explore what we may learn about a particular group (i.e. relationship abuse survivors) through analyzing their production of metaphor. In this way, it demonstrates why the theory of metaphor and the field of figurative language production matter in the real world.

Keywords:

metaphorical analogies, relationship abuse, computer-mediated discourse, frames, scenarios

1 Introduction

When people undergo traumatic events, they frequently turn to metaphor in an attempt to make what might initially seem indescribable into something comprehensible to others, and/or to help themselves reach a clearer understanding of what has happened to them. This investigation explores such metaphorical language produced in computer-mediated discourse by survivors of relationship abuse to communicate about various aspects of their experience, thus shedding light on a traditionally “taboo” subject that many people find difficult to broach. The specific linguistic focus here consists of metaphorical analogies that these survivors use in online discussion forums to discuss their abuse experience. The topics they write about include their perceptions of themselves and their own emotions, survivors generally, their abusers and/or abusers in general, and the healing process. Moreover, they frequently discuss key moments in abusive relationships: for example, the “moment of realization” when they finally felt they understood the true nature of the abuser, the “discard” when the abuser broke off the relationship, “hoovering” when an abuser attempts to reestablish contact and “suck” the selected victim back into a cycle of abuse, and/or the establishment and maintenance of “No Contact” (NC) as a crucial step of recovery. Further, the survivors sometimes try to explain the world from the perspective of the abuser.

The present analysis first explores the ways survivors “frame” their experience through a particular source domain, and then looks at the various source domain “scenarios” that are drawn upon to elaborate particular salient details of the abuse. The analysis also discusses the ways in which survivors react to and negotiate metaphorical scenarios and frames among themselves in the discussion forum threads. Following this introduction, this chapter continues

in section 2 by setting the scene through presenting background information about metaphor, frames and scenarios. Section 3 continues by giving an overview both of the primary material under investigation (section 3.1) and the methods used here to identify and analyze metaphorical analogies (section 3.2). The discussion then moves on to explore the findings, first with regard to frames (section 4.1), selected scenarios (section 4.2), and the negotiation among posters as they try to reach an understanding of their experiences with relationship abuse (section 4.3). Finally, section 5 presents concluding thoughts.

The chapter is grounded in the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), and builds upon established theories about metaphorical frames and scenarios to explore what we can learn about a particular group (i.e. relationship abuse survivors) through analyzing their production of metaphor. In this way, it demonstrates why the theory of metaphor and the field of figurative language production matter in the real world. The discussion is rich with examples from the data, to provide readers with greater insight into the dynamics of the forum.

2 Background: Metaphor, frames and scenarios

Metaphor is commonly used to discuss abstract, complex ideas in terms of more concrete entities, whereby certain real or perceived qualities from a (typically concrete) “source” domain are mapped on a (typically abstract) “target” domain (see e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). An example could be when the process of recovery from abuse (the target) is discussed in terms of a physical journey (the source). Cognitive linguists who adhere to some version of the CMT maintain that the metaphors we use in language offer evidence about how we actually conceive of the world around us. When it comes to traumatic events in our lives, “[m]etaphors can help people to talk about difficult, emotionally intense or uncommon experiences, and thus,

according to the conceptual metaphor theory, to think about them” (Deignan, 2010, pp. 53-54). Metaphor has been found to naturally lend itself as a resource when people are attempting to share, explain or make sense of highly emotional, distressing events (see e.g. Cameron, 2011; Demjén, 2016; Kövecses, 2000; Semino et al., 2017). Systematic analysis of metaphors used in authentic computer-mediated discourse may therefore provide increased insight into the attitudes and experiences of relationship abuse survivors.

Any particular target domain may be “framed” in different ways (see e.g. Semino & Demjén, 2018). This means that a target domain may be understood in more than a single way. As Entman explains, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The source domain used to shed light on a particular topic domain may seriously affect the overall messages conveyed, including emotional connotations and details about participants and actions. Such frames have the potential for impacting people’s reasoning, with important consequences for their subsequent attitudes and beliefs (see e.g. Steen et al., 2014 for discussion of possible metaphor framing effects).

Source domains, in turn, typically have varied structural aspects that may be called upon to highlight different aspects of a target domain. Musolff (2016, p. 30) writes about this in terms of alternative metaphorical “scenarios”, which he defines as “a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about the prototypical elements of a concept, that is, participants, “dramatic” storylines and default outcomes, as well as ethical evaluations of these elements, which are connected to the social attitudes and emotional stances that are prevalent in the respective discourse community”. Such assumptions are structurally mapped onto a target domain through metaphor. Musolff illustrates this process with the source domain of marriage, which has a number of varying scenarios: courtship, engagement, wedding,

honeymoon, parenting, separation, divorce, etc. While the ontological structure of any of these scenarios could be mapped onto his particular research interest of EU political relations, each carries different entailments and thus different implications. Musolff maintains that not only do such scenarios allow people to map source to target concepts, they also allow for the building of narrative framing for the conceptualization of the issues in question. In other words, they provide the foundation for frames that a particular discourse community comes to avail itself of to describe a particular abstract phenomenon (Musolff, 2006, p. 36).

3 Material and methods

This section first introduces and describes the material used as the primary data for the present investigation. It then goes on to discuss the methods used for extracting metaphors from the data, as well as those employed for determining the underlying frames and scenarios of each instance.

3.1 Primary data

The empirical data for this investigation consists of the metaphorical language produced between 2009 and 2015 in a publically available online discussion forum for anonymous posters, accessible without password protection. The forum allows survivors of relationship abuse to start and/or respond to threads about their ongoing or past experience in an abusive relationship by posting messages under one of four general topics: “welcome”, “journey”, “families”, and “male survivors”. The present investigation explores the discourse in the two most productive of these general topics, that is, the “welcome” threads where newcomers

typically introduce themselves and their stories and the “journey” threads where users post about varying aspects of their experience. The data consists of a total of 46 million words of text.

The relationships discussed most frequently involve a love partner: a spouse, a live-in partner, or a boyfriend/girlfriend. Posters discuss both heterosexual and homosexual relationships which have lasted anywhere from weeks to decades, and may still be ongoing. One factor common to many of these stories is infidelity on the part of the abuser, usually long-term and sometimes with multiple partners. Other abusive relationships discussed concern family members (usually parents, siblings, or children), colleagues, and/or platonic friends. The abuse under discussion is always emotional and verbal, a common form being “gaslighting” where a person is manipulated into questioning his/her own feelings or sanity. This type of abuse, however, often occurs together with other forms of domestic violence such as physical, sexual, digital and/or financial abuse. All of these topics appear in the forum.

The forum language is English, but the posters are from around the world; although strictly enforced forum rules prohibit posters from revealing identifying information, some indicate that English is not their first language. These threads thus instantiate a practical example of English as a Lingua Franca, a forum where English is used as the language of communication between speakers with different first languages. The 46 million words under investigation here comprise a total of 4042 threads, consisting of 302,793 entries produced by 4561 individual posters.

3.2 Identification and analytical procedures

It would be extremely time-consuming to extract metaphors by reading manually through a multi-million-word corpus. This investigation therefore focuses on a single explicit textual

marker of metaphor: the use of the lexeme ANALOGY, i.e. the words *analogy* and *analogies*. Not only does its use more or less unambiguously flag metaphor, it also has the added benefit of being easily searchable in a corpus. It should however be recognized that this type of focused search does not allow for the identification of *all* metaphors in the corpus (nor even all metaphorical analogies), since metaphors may lack any specific lexical markers at all, or be flagged by other markers. Goatly (2011, pp. 178-209), for example, suggests a number of other potential flags of metaphor, such as the use of other explicit markers (e.g. *metaphor/-ically*), intensifiers (e.g. *literally*), copular or clausal similes (e.g. *like, as if*), and orthography (e.g. scare quotes). The lexeme ANALOGY is thus but one of a number of lexical markers that may flag metaphor in discourse, one of many possible access words providing an entry point into the vast amount of available data.

The appearance of the lexeme ANALOGY functions as an alert to the presence of an analogy, that is usually (but not always) in close proximity to that lexeme. Any retrieved concordance line and its immediate co-text may, however, only *refer* to the analogy in question rather than contain it. Identifying the analogies therefore required returning to the original text. By way of example, consider the concordance lines in sentences (1) and (2).

(1) Here's the *toaster analogy* that we frequently use.¹

(2) I absolutely agree with your *train analogy*.

In example (1), the poster prefaces her entry by overtly stating that she is introducing an analogy, which she then immediately goes on to detail (presented in example (3) further on in this section).² Example (2), by contrast, comprises a poster's response to an analogy that had been introduced earlier in the thread by someone else. Identifying the source entry containing

¹ Note that all illustrative examples from the data are reproduced with the original spelling, punctuation and grammar.

² This chapter refers to survivors as female and abusers as male, because this is the prototypical pattern in relationship abuse. This decision, however, is not intended to deny that there are both male and female survivors, just as there are male and female abusers.

the actual analogy with which the writer of (2) agreed therefore required skimming through the relevant thread (see example (4) further on). Note that 38 observed instances of the lexeme were discarded from further analysis, because a poster had used the term inappropriately when there was no analogy, because the original analogy could simply not be located, or because the analogy was literal rather than metaphorical. Unlike metaphorical analogies, literal analogies involve similarity within a single semantic domain rather than between two domains, as in a comparison between a spectrum of psychopathy and a spectrum of autism (see Glucksberg & McGlone, 1999, p. 1542).

The next procedural step involved determination of the general frame for each identified analogy. Each such comparison was first given a brief “label” summing up its main contents, i.e. “the X analogy”. In many cases, this label came directly from one of the discourse participants and was thus retrievable from the thread, as we see with the “toaster” and “train” analogies in examples (1) and (2) respectively. In the absence of any such summation by a discourse participant, I provided the referential labels. In the majority of cases, the selected word or phrase for the label was immediately recoverable from the text, in order to be as true to the original analogy as possible.

Assignment of each frame and scenario was accomplished through semantic annotation of the analogy labels, using the Wmatrix software tool (Rayson, 2009). Among other features, Wmatrix provides a web interface to the UCREL Semantic Annotation System (USAS), a framework for automatic semantic annotation of uploaded texts. For every word in a given text, USAS provides a default semantic tag that reflects the most likely category for that word, based on a general English language ontology (see Koller et al., 2008 for more background information about USAS). The USAS semantic tagset employs a multi-tier structure based on

21 major discourse fields, presented in Figure 1 (retrieved from Archer et al., 2002, p. 2:). The discourse fields are also further subdivided into a total of 232 more finely-grained categories.³

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1 USAS major discourse fields

The present investigation equates frames with the USAS major discourse fields and scenarios with the subdivisions, thereby permitting a possible 21 frames and 232 scenarios. As an example, the “toaster” label from example (1) was tagged by USAS as F1, meaning that it falls into the discourse field/frame of “F: food and farming”, subdivision/scenario “1: food”. By contrast, “train” in example (2) was tagged M3, belonging to the discourse field/frame of “M: movement, location, travel and transport”, subdivision/scenario “3: vehicles and transport on land”. Note that by the method employed here, Musolff’s “marriage” frame discussed in section 2 would have been coded as the “S: social actions, states and processes” frame and “4: kin” scenario.

Although Wmatrix has been successfully employed in earlier metaphor research, its primary use has thus far been as an aid in *identifying* linguistic metaphors and/or key semantic domains in discourse (see e.g. Demmen et al., 2015; Koller et al., 2008), rather than as a means of assigning frames and scenarios of *already identified* metaphors. The extension of the use of automated semantic annotation employed here is thus intended as a valid and transparent means of identifying the most likely frame and scenario of a given metaphor, allowing for greater replication than would a more intuitive categorization.⁴

Following the assignment of frames and scenarios, the correspondences between the various elements expressed in the analogy and the various elements in the abuse experience

³ A complete list of the USAS subcategories is located here:
<http://stig.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix3/semtags.html>.

⁴ Replication data for this chapter is located at <https://dataverse.no/>. This includes the full context for the metaphors included in the data, along with the selected keywords, USAS codes and all other analysis codes, as well as the R code (R Core Team, 2017) written for the quantitative data and creation of the table in Figure 2.

were fleshed out, along with any overall message. In the “toaster” metaphor (continued in example (3) below), the toaster corresponds to the abuse victim, the toaster’s owner/user corresponds to the abuser, and the implication is that abusers have a purely instrumental view of their victims: they are not worth much effort when problems arise, and easily replaceable.

(3) Try to imagine another person as a toaster. It has a function. You plug it in and it does what you want it to do. You put it away when you aren’t using it. You don’t think about that toaster if you don’t need it. If it stops working for you, you toss it in the trash go get another one. The real problem for them is that you require some serious work on their part to be sucked into being the toaster.

(4) You have a runaway train with CD [cognitive dissonance]. Stop the train before it does more damage, then later, go figure out how it got loose.

The “train” analogy which is the topic of example (2), by contrast, highlights a different aspect of the abuse experience; see example (4). The topic here is cognitive dissonance (CD), the mental stress caused by holding two contradictory beliefs at the same time. This is common among survivors of abuse, especially in the initial stages of recovery, as they try to come to terms with the stark contrast between two equally real perceptions of the same person: for instance, the positive yet ultimately false image of the person they fell in love with versus the manipulative betrayer s/he actually turned out to be. In example (4), a runaway train corresponds to the state of CD – something uncontrollable, disempowering and, for the time being, inexplicable. The implication, offered as advice, is that taking control and resolving the CD should be the first order of business before trying to ascertain the underlying causes of that CD.

The nature of discussion forum threads, with back and forth communication between any number of participants, also allows for investigation into how survivors react to, accept, expand, and/or reject the metaphorical comparisons advanced by members of the discourse

community. This final stage in the present investigation was carried out through exploration of the discussion among posters subsequent to the introduction of each identified analogy to evaluate how they negotiate a given analogy, seen in the light of their own understanding and experience with abuse.

4 Findings

In the 46 million words in the corpus, there are 596 occurrences where the lexeme ANALOGY, usually in the singular form *analogy*, signals metaphorical comparison. These are distributed in 413 of the 4042 threads under investigation, and were written by 358 of the 4561 individuals who contributed to those threads. The occurrences thus involve slightly more than 10% of the threads in the corpus and roughly 8% of all posters. Keeping in mind that any one thread involves interaction among more posters than just those who actually produced text employing the lexeme ANALOGY, the 8% figure clearly represents no more than a minimum figure of those whose discussion touched on a metaphorical analogy.

Some of these 596 occurrences refer to a single metaphor, because the word *analogy* sometimes appears in different entries within a single thread to refer to the same analogy. Excluding such overlap results in a total of 503 individual metaphors flagged by the lexeme. In 216 of these analogies, it is the producer of the metaphor who has explicitly introduced it as an analogy in a “my analogy for X is” form, as in the “toaster” metaphor from examples (1) and (3). The remaining 287 metaphorical analogies are marked as such in a response following some variation on a “my opinion of your X analogy” form, as in the “train” metaphor from examples (2) and (4). Further, some individuals are responsible for the creation of more than one marked metaphorical analogy; the 503 individual analogies were produced by 311 different posters.

The overall picture is thus quite complex. The following sections explore this complexity by discussion three separate, albeit related aspects: the selected frames (section 4.1), selected scenarios (section 4.2), and the function of the analogies and responses to them in the discussion threads as survivors attempt to negotiate both individual and collective understandings of their trauma and its aftermath (section 4.3).

4.1 Frames

Feil! Fant ikke referansebildet. presents the distribution of the 503 observed occurrences of individual metaphorical analogies, divided across frames, corresponding to the USAS discourse fields. The bars are arranged in order from the least to most frequent frame.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2 Observed occurrences of 503 individual metaphorical analogies per frame

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no single means of dealing with the topic of relationship abuse. All of the 21 USAS major discourse fields appear to varying extents, with the exception of “C: arts and crafts”. Table 1 shows illustrative examples from the corpus of each frame, presented in order from the most to the least frequent frames. The numbering for the examples follows in sequence from the previously numbered examples in this chapter, and the key words and phrases employed for the referential labels semantically annotated by USAS are italicized. The final column lists the particular scenario assigned to the given example, useful to make sense of the assignment of any given term to a particular frame.

Table 1 Illustrative examples of each frame

Code	Frame	Numbered example	Scenario
L	Life and living things	(5) You can't expect a person that has no capacity for love, empathy, or remorse to understand what those emotions feel like - to do so would be tantamount to expecting a <i>Great White Shark</i> to feel bad for eating that cute fuzzy seal pup. They	L2 Living creatures: animals, birds, etc.

		do it because that's what they do. They don't feel bad about hurting you. [...] Understanding the nature of the predator can and will help you to come to terms with leaving this creature behind-that and a whole lot of support.	
O	Substances, materials, objects and equipment	(6) Did you ever have one of those <i>alarm clocks</i> that starts off quiet and then gets loud? It gets louder so gradually you don't notice it until it's really loud, but if it went off at half-blast it would startle you awake instantly. I think it's like that only they get shittier instead of louder. Year 4 shit in year 1, he's gone. Year 4 shit after year 3, not so startling.	O2 Objects generally
B	The body and the individual	(7) Sometimes I think I've almost accepted it, then I have dream that wakes me up in a cold sweat. I do feel like a <i>drug addict</i> going thru withdrawals. That is a good analogy ... I am a drug addict.	B2- Disease
S	Social actions, states and processes	(8) That's what he always was trying: scare me, boss me and make me feel guilty I felt like being expected to be some kind of newborn <i>Jesus Christ</i> , being crucified for some one else's sins.	S9 Religion and the supernatural
A	General and abstract terms	(9) These folks set up the lake with the <i>thin ice</i> , then blame us for crashing through. Don't play that game.	A15- Danger
F	Food and farming	(10) I sound pretty selfish by saying that, but I felt like his compliments were empty. More <i>crumbs than anything</i> .	F1- Lack of food
K	Entertainment, sports and games	(11) Ex wife number 1 used this analogy: "He's like a child with a <i>toy</i> . You're one of his favorite toys, but he's bored. He's tired of playing with you right now because he has a brand new toy that he wants to show off to everyone. That new toy is all he can think about right now. He didn't donate you or give you away though. He just put you on the shelf until he's ready to play with you again."	K6 Children's games and toys
Z	Names and grammar	(12) Think of <i>The Wizard Of Oz</i> – "I am the great and powerful Oz!!!!" In the end, in reality, he was just a man. No magic, no real power. Just a bunch of smoke and mirrors. When the curtain is pulled back the reality is revealed.	Z3 Other proper names
W	World and the environment	(13) There's a range of emotions that are an inevitable part of healing; they come thru when we're strong enough to handle them. And they're like <i>waves on the ocean</i> , they come again & again till we get thru them, but we do; the best we can.	W3 Geographical terms
H	Architecture, housing and the home	(14) I'm slowly building up an impenetrable <i>brick wall</i> , probably not a good thing but I'm safeguarding myself from getting hurt again.	H2 Parts of buildings
I	Money and commerce in industry	(15) As to why she won't leave you alone, to her you are a nice <i>\$20 bill</i> in the street. She will find it worthwhile to chase it down and pocket it if she can.	I1 Money generally

M	Movement, location, travel and transport	(16) Remember the <i>air crash</i> analogy - where you have to put your own mask on first before you think of helping anyone else. Well you're still in the plane and you still need the oxygen. You can't afford to pass it over to someone else yet - you have to put yourself first.	M5 Flying and aircraft
Q	Language and communication	(17) If they think of everything intellectually perhaps I was a <i>library book</i> to distract him from his life for a set period of time, he always knew he was going to take the book back and never read it again.	Q1.2 Speech: Communicative
X	Psychological actions, states and processes	(18) Full it felt like a trance for me too. like i was <i>hypnotized</i> by a hypnoseducer.	X2 Mental actions and processes
T	Time	(19) It is like <i>morning</i> , when Sun wakes up and we impatiently wait for it to come up and shine warm on us. In impatience we forget to enjoy the arrival of a new day, but we want warmth and midday now... This is the morning of our life, and i wish us all to find trust and patience to live it fully	T1.2 Time: Momentary
G	Government and public	(20) I feel like I just got out of <i>jail</i> .	G1.2 Law and order
Y	Science and technology	(21) They've "installed" a kind of <i>software</i> in our heads that make us work like that for a while, until we "uninstall" that. Like with an old computer, uninstalling a heavy program takes a LONG time. In fact, it's more like an <i>operative system</i> , and those take time to uninstall after an infection, and they take even longer to reinstall when we decide which memories to forget and which ones to keep. Hm. Guess I'm in analogy mode today.	Y2 Information technology and computing
77N	Numbers and measurement	(22) The best analogy I heard for the holidays is that its like a <i>magnifying glass</i> -- you look more carefully at what's in your life and also what's missing.	N3.2+ Size: Big
E	Emotion	(23) I hate him with the <i>force</i> of a supernova.	E3- Violent: Angry
P	Education	(24) A psychic I saw a couple of times used this analogy once when I was talking about how much crap I have had to deal with in my lifetime. She said that in life some people drop of out school in 8th grade, some go on to college, some obtain <i>PhD</i> ... in my spiritual journey during this lifetime, I am in the PhD category, meaning I am learning a lot in this round....	P1 Education in general
C	Arts and crafts	NONE	NONE

The most common frame is “L: life and living things”, where nearly all instances have been coded with the “L2: living creatures: animals, birds, etc.” scenario. Survivors most often describe their abuser in terms of an animal, as in the “Great White Shark” in example (5) from Table 1. Such an analogy, where the innate nature of an abuser is likened to that of a deadly

predator, is frequently advanced either as an explanation for the otherwise seemingly inexplicable behavior of the abuser, or to offer advice – that is, there is no point in reconciliation with such a person, as they will naturally and ruthlessly turn on you at some point.

Further analogies belonging to the L2 scenario with this identical theme are readily found in the corpus, e.g. as variants of Aesop's "The farmer and the viper" fable involving unavoidable betrayal committed by remorseless creatures. An example is the "snake and man" analogy in (25):

(25) A friend actually gave me a good analogy about that the other day. A man climbing a mountain path comes across a snake. The snake asks the man for a ride to the top of the mountain. The man says "but you are a snake and you will bite me." The snake says "no, if you give me a ride to the top of the mountain I will be grateful and will not bite you." So the man puts the snake on his shoulder and climbs the mountain. At the top the man reaches up and grabs the snake to put him down and the snake bites him. The man says "you promised you would not bite me" and the snake says "yes, but I am a snake". Substitute abuser for snake and you can see that no matter WHAT they say and what you do, in the end they ARE an abuser and they will behave accordingly. They ride on us to the top of the mountain and when they get what they want they bite/discard us and move on.

The tale of the scorpion and the frog, a more well-known variant of the Aesop fable, also appears in the corpus. Here, a frog agrees to carry a scorpion across the river on its back, in return for reassurances that the scorpion will not sting him; halfway across the river, the scorpion breaks his promise and stings the frog, killing it. When asked the reason for his betrayal, the scorpion simply replies, "It's my nature". While the exact species of the perpetrator in the animal analogies may thus vary, the events frequently parallel each other and the lessons remain constant. Such similarities do not escape unnoticed by the forum posters, who find

reassurance from the correspondence between stories, as they provide some sort of explanation for the abuse. We read about just such relief in the poster's statement in (26).

(26) Count me among those who are amazed at the repeat of almost the same story, with altered details making them differ. It is comforting, oddly, to learn that they are a type of creature, and that it wasn't really me who was at fault for things going so badly for so long, it really was HIM.

One thread in particular is devoted entirely to the perceived similarities between abusers and living creatures, a focus triggered by the title chosen by the thread originator: “Which animal or creature describes your abuser”.⁵ Table 2 presents the interaction pattern among the discussion participants, which mainly consists of a direct chain of replies with each person offering their choice of animal best suited to represent their abuser. Most, though not all, posters offer reasons for their selection. As an example, the explained rationale for the choice of cuckoo bird in post 10 is that these birds leave their eggs in another bird’s nest and have the “victim bird” raise the young. This same poster then suggests the condor as an alternative suggestion: a bird of prey, “distant and uncaring, predatorial and silent”. In addition to a simple chain, however, the interaction patterns also shows some forks, where a particular message generates one or more specific replies; we see this after posts 5, 17 and 21.

Table 2 Interaction pattern for thread “Which animal or creature describes your abuser”⁶

Post	Poster	Creature <i>or</i> function
1	1	Introduces the question corresponding to the thread title
2	2	maggot
3	3	wolf
4	4	blob fish
5	5	demon (also turd)
6	4	➤ reply to Post 5 (Coprolite)
7	6	vampire, piranha, wolf in sheep’s clothing or anything else hideous I can think of
8	7	demonic troll (also twatwaffle)
9	8	tapeworm

⁵ The entire text from this thread is available as supplementary data to this chapter at <https://dataverse.no/>.

⁶ Supplementary data containing the entire thread outlined in Table 2 is located at <https://dataverse.no/>.

10	9	cuckoo bird or condor
11	10	the human butterfly larvae, also known as <i>Dermotobia hominis</i>
12	11	snake
13	12	The Toad
14	13	snake
15	14	wolf, vampire
16	15	vampire bat
17	16	amoeba
18	13	➤ reply to Post 17
19	15	○ reply to Post 18
20	2	➤ response to all participants: maggot
21	17	snake, wolf, cockroach
22	13	➤ reply to Post 21: chocolate covered roaches
23	18	snake
24	17	○ reply to Post 22: roach
25	18	▪ reply to Post 24 ANALOGY: roach
26	17	• reply to Post 25: roach
27	18	scorpion
28	20	shark
29	21	mosquito

Although most users posted only once, a few posted two or three times in response to someone else's suggestion. All told, this thread generated 29 entries (indicated by the "Post" column) written by 21 individual participants (indicated by the "Poster" column). Here we see that abusers are compared to vicious predators (e.g. *wolf*, *shark*), poisonous creatures (e.g. *snake*, *scorpion*), monsters (e.g. *demon*, *vampire*), and parasites (e.g. *maggot*, *tapeworm*).

Note that this particular thread appeared in the retrieved data due to post 25 (in bold font), because it includes the search term ANALOGY. Here, poster 18 specifically compliments the analogy in post 24 by writing "lol great analogy" by way of complimenting poster 17's comparison of the abuser's fear of exposure to the flight reaction of a cockroach when the light is turned on. Had the thread closed before that point, it would not have appeared as part of the analyzed material because most of the metaphorical analogies are unmarked by explicit lexical flags of any sort. Table 2 therefore serves to as a reminder that there are a great number of metaphors in the corpus beyond those specifically identified through reliance on a single lexeme as an entry point into the data.

Survivors also use animal analogies to talk about the relation between abusers and their victims, as in example (27) with a cat/mouse analogy, involving the dual entailments of abusers as predators and survivors as prey. In addition, survivors employ animal comparisons to describe themselves in the post-relationship phases. In example (28), for instance, we read a survivor's description of her fragility and vulnerability in the wake of betrayal. More common in the data, however, are cases such as that illustrated by example (29), where a survivor describes different stages of the healing process in terms of the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly. The "Phoenix rising" analogy also appears in the data as a means of referring to survivors in the recovery process, indicative of the feeling of empowerment after their tribulations.

(27) They are just predators. A cat, pushing the half dead mouse a bit more around to see if there's any more entertainment left there.

(28) I have never been this fragile before. All of my armour is gone. I am a turtle without a shell and my shell is gone forever. I will never be the same.

(29) The only analogy I can come up with is of a butterfly hatching out onto the leaf where its chrysalis has lain, seemingly dormant. Yet inside, so much has been happening. Some of us are still in the chrysalis, still transforming. Others are just beginning to emerge; still others have left the chrysalis and are drying their new wings in the sun, ready for flight. None of us are caterpillars anymore....all of us are impatient for flight, but we're not all at that stage yet. When we've gone through the metamorphosis, we will be - we just have to keep moving forward. Time does the rest.

Another analogy that appears repeatedly throughout the corpus to explain why anyone would stay so long in an abusive relationship is that of the "frog in boiling water", illustrated in examples (30) and (31).

(30) It's like that frog on boiling water analogy. If I had known how toxic and abusive he was from the beginning, I would have ran, fast and far immediately. But just like the frog put in lukewarm water - it will boil alive to its own demise when the heat is ever so slowly turned up.

(31) I remind myself of the frog in boiling water analogy and thank my lucky stars that I got out of it wiser.

The poster in example (30) first mentions the analogy and then elaborates upon the details, the comparison being that abuse escalates so slowly that the victim does not even realize she is in danger until the situation is truly precarious. What is notable about example (31) is that the poster merely mentions the analogy without explaining it; she thus ostensibly presumes that the underlying meaning has become part of the jargon of the discourse community to such an extent that no elaboration is required.

We find a parallel analogy in the “alarm clock” example in (6) from Table 1, including as it does a similar message about the gradually increasing scope and nature of abuse. This particular analogy adheres to the frame of “O: substances, materials, objects and equipment” rather than to the “L: life and living things” frame of the “frog” analogy. It therefore demonstrates how the same topic may be framed in different, yet appropriate and communicatively successful ways. We also see this phenomenon in cases where survivors discuss how abusers view their abused partners as some type of dispensable object that first captivates the abuser. But the abuser ultimately either breaks the object or grows weary of it and casts it aside, only to find a new one to replace it. In example (3), previously cited in section 3.2, that object is a toaster (from the “F: food and farming frame”). In (32), by contrast, the item in question is a household appliance (from the “O” frame, as with the alarm clock) – exciting at first, but easily and unemotionally replaced when broken.

(32) It helped me when I read something about how the abuser loved us--kind of like how we love when we get a new washing machine or refrigerator or whatever. At first, we absolutely love it! It washes our clothes so well! It's so useful! It's shiny and bright and new. However, in time, we don't really think of it as anything special anymore--it's just there. And then it breaks, and we replace it with a new model. And we don't feel bad getting rid of the old one, it doesn't work for us anymore.

In example (11) from Table 1, the object representing survivors is a toy that is merely put aside for use at a later time, rather than being completely discarded; analogies involving toys belong to the “K: entertainment, sports and games” frame, which includes a subcategory/scenario for children’s games and toys. In a different thread, a separate poster in example (33) adds a few other entailments to the “toy” scenario: the toy is not supposed to repair itself, and it becomes momentarily interesting again if someone else is attracted to it. The two examples together demonstrate how posters may focus on different facets of the same scenario to highlight different, yet related aspects of the abuse experience.

(33) But the toy is always supposed to lay there where it was dropped. The toy is not supposed to crawl off and repaint and repair itself and find new kids to play with. So, the toddler expects always the toy to be lying there, for when the urge hits it to pick it up and ramble it to check if the toy is still playable. And if another kid dares to touch the old thrown away, forgotten toy then all of a sudden it becomes important to grab it back from the other kid and possess it once more, for a short time only, just to have the feeling it's still their possession.

Looking at some of the other examples in Table 1, we see that the “B: the body and the individual” frame is relatively frequent, mainly due to the prominence of analogies related to addiction, as in example (7) where the attraction to an abuser is likened to a drug addiction. Other addictive substances mentioned include alcohol, cigarettes, tobacco and dopamine, as

well as the activity of gambling. Posters sometimes draw comparisons between their feelings of longing for the abuser's attention with their past or present experiences of dealing with addictive substances and/or rehabilitation, such that their metaphorical analogies are grounded in personal physical experience.

In addition, references to popular culture are frequent, falling into the “Z: names and grammar” frame and exemplified in Table 1 by (12), where the abuser is compared to the Wizard of Oz – seemingly all-powerful and omniscient but later revealed as a fraud. The “Wizard of Oz” film is also the source for a term accepted into the jargon of the community and frequently used in analogies – that is, “flying monkeys” who are friends of the abuser/Wizard and do his bidding (and should be consequently be ignored and blocked during the recovery process). In addition to Oz, metaphors include references to fairy tales (e.g. Prince Charming, Beauty and the Beast, Bambi), fiction/fantasy films or series (e.g. the Terminator, the Daleks from “Doctor Who” and the Dementors from “Harry Potter”), together with a range of other genres (e.g. living with a tiger in “Life of Pi” and the sinking of the Titanic [do you go down with the ship or try to survive?]). And despite the serious topic, we find humor. One survivor compares herself to Sesame Street's Cookie Monster, who deserves the whole cookie rather than just crumbs. Another replies to a previous poster's analogy comparing her abuser to the Blob (of 1950s American science fiction/horror fame) with the ironically appropriate “freaky fact” in (34).

(34) Fun/freaky fact: The Blob was double billed with..... *drum roll*..... I married a monster from outer space, how's that for metaphors about abusers.

4.2 *Selected scenarios*

As discussed in section 3.2, Wmatrix divides each major discourse field into one of 232 more finely-grained categories, equated here as the scenarios employed to communicate about survivors’ experiences with abuse. To illustrate the richness of the data, both in terms of congruity and variation, this section delves more deeply into one of the observed frames – that of the “W: world and our environment”, accounting for 28 observed metaphorical analogies in the data. Each of these analogies has been subdivided into one of six scenarios: Table 3 provides an overview of the six scenarios and the numbers of observed occurrences of each of them, together with referential labels for each instance.

Table 3 Scenarios for the “W: world and the environment” frame

Code	Scenario	Number of observed instances	Labels for observed instances
W1	the universe	3	<i>moon, globe</i>
W2	light	2	<i>light (x2)</i>
W2-	darkness	1	<i>darkness</i>
W3	geographical terms	15	<i>beach, boulder, cave, earthquake, iceberg, island, ocean (x5), pool, pothole, stream, waves</i>
W4	the weather	7	<i>cloud, fog, hurricane, tornado (x3), weather</i>
W5	green issues	1	<i>nature</i>

These 28 analogies were produced by 27 separate individuals, with one poster having created two of them (the “moon” analogy and one of the “ocean” analogies).

Further narrowing the focus, we see that seven of the 28 analogies fall into the “W4: weather” scenario, four of which discuss abuse in terms of a natural disaster. Three elaborate on a tornado analogy, all in independent threads; see (35) through (37). The fourth, cited in (38), selects a hurricane analogy.

(35) I think of them [abusers] kind of like *tornados*. They touch down and destroy everything in their path then disappear, we good people just happen to be the pretty red barn in the field they land in.

(36) In a blink of an eye we can lose all that we have - the psycho came through our lives much like a *tornado* showing no mercy on who they touched down on - but it is the love and volunteering of others much like this site and in our communities that pull victims together and get them back on their feet - How would we live without that love -we would be nothing but a tornado and a psychopath that only rips things apart.

(37) I like the analogy I read recently that said something to the effect of: “People survive *tornadoes* and large predator attacks, but you wouldn’t want to go searching for one” in other words, you really don’t want one back.

(38) My latest analogy for the abuser is, a *hurricane* came through and ripped the roof off my house - nothing I can do to change what happened, but I am in full control of my recovery.

Both (35) and (36) are similar in that it is the abuser who is equated with a tornado, while the survivors are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, the random and disempowered victims of indomitable and ruthless forces of nature. The comment in (36), however, is preceded by the poster’s recounting of her then-current experience with an actual tornado that had just hit her local community. She describes the grief and shock among the people who had lost their homes and places of business, and – importantly – also the generosity and caring among those who were able to offer help and support. This image of solidarity in the face of inexplicable adversity adds a positive note to the analogy, missing in (35). This particular analogy is but one of 40 individual metaphors in the data that, according to the posters, derive from a literal experience rather than any hypothetical situation.

Examples (37) and (38), by contrast, focus on the recovery process. While example (37) is the least specific of the four analogies in that no precise entailments are explained, it adds a parallel metaphor comparing an abuser to a predator and abuse to an attack: abusers are

destructive, even deadly, and have no welcome role in our lives. The figurative hurricane in (38) plays the same disempowering role as the tornado in both (35) and (36), yet here the poster describes the subsequent reclaiming of her own sense of empowerment in even stronger terms than in (36): the helpless victim of a natural disaster becomes a determined survivor.

This same contrast between disempowered victim and empowered survivor in the wake of a natural catastrophe is explicitly discussed by another poster, in an analogy about earthquakes – also falling into the “W: world and our environment” frame, but categorized in the scenario of “W3: geographical terms” rather than “W4: weather”. In example (39), a poster brings up her therapist’s analogy where the overall abuse experience (here, of childhood abuse) is compared to an earthquake.

(39) She gave me an analogy to state her position of total responsibility for choosing life’s experiences.. Her words, “If someone finds themselves in an *earthquake*, that person chose the experience on some level.”

By the logic of this therapist, no abuse survivor is a completely innocent victim of random events, contrary to the contention in the earlier tornado and hurricane analogies. Instead, we are all to some degree responsible for everything that befalls us (in the case of this analogy, perhaps by having deliberately chosen to live in earthquake-prone area?). In a sense, this therapist’s view is one of empowerment, for it should always be possible to actively change circumstances that are under our control. In this case, however, the poster adamantly rejects the implications of the therapist’s metaphor; see (40).

(40) I can not accept this belief system. If in an earthquake, i do not hold myself accountable for being the victim of an earthquake, but only my actions following my experience. How i cope with it. i am not responsible for childhood abuse, only my journey to heal from it. And i did not choose to be a victim of a disordered abuser.

But I am responsible for healing from it, growing from this so i will not be targeted again.

This statement thus mirrors the view expressed in the hurricane analogy in (38), with the distinction between hapless victim and responsible survivor. In these scenarios, while the posters accept no blame for the abuse itself, they do accept responsibility for their reactions to the abuse – that is, for their “journey” in healing.

4.3 *Negotiation among posters*

There are two main functions of posts that include the words *analogy* or *analogies*: explanation and support. These two functions account for 215 and 339, respectively, of the 596 total observed posts that include the lexeme ANALOGY to refer to a metaphor. First, when posters introduce metaphorical analogies as explanation about some aspect(s) of abuse, metaphor relates either to an *individual* experience or to the *collective* experience. In example (9) from Table 1, for instance, a poster writes about her own personal feelings by comparing her struggles in coming to terms with her partner’s deception to a drug addict’s withdrawal symptoms. In addition, posters sometimes suggest metaphorical explanatory analogies about someone else’s individual experience, often by way of advice. Example (41) provides an example of such advice, where a poster offers another forum member an analogy between emotional abuse and physical illness, in the hope of promoting a new and helpful perspective about person’s struggles in the aftermath of an abusive relationship.

(41) Emotionally, its like your immune system being breached by an abuser virus that works against ourselves. Once that immune system is restored, it will not let that invader in again. Hope that analogy works for you!

Most often though, explanations in the corpus extend beyond a single person's experience or feelings, and instead describe the abuse experience in general terms. One example of this is example (21) from Table 1, reproduced below and renumbered as (42) for the sake of convenience, where the poster first introduces and elaborates upon two related metaphors as a way to describe a facet of the collective experience of recovery and healing after relationship abuse.

(42) They've "installed" a kind of software in our heads that make us work like that for a while, until we "uninstall" that. Like with an old computer, uninstalling a heavy program takes a LONG time. In fact, it's more like an operative system, and those take time to uninstall after an infection, and they take even longer to reinstall when we decide which memories to forget and which ones to keep. Hm. Guess I'm in analogy mode today.

Such explanatory analogies contribute towards a sense of group community and solidarity in the forum, important given the feelings of loneliness and isolation that many posters describe in their offline life where they feel they are often met with a lack of understanding about their situation.

Posts including the lexeme ANALOGY that function as support do so by overtly confirming that an analogy suggested by a previous poster resonates, as was evident with the "train" analogy in examples (2) and (4). Maíz-Arévalo and Sánchez-Moya (2017) note this function in their work developing a taxonomy for support strategies in computer-mediated communication, where they explore practices in an Intimate Partner Violence online forum. They find that participants express support through showing approval (acceptance, compliment, agreement) or showing kindness (empathy, holding, urging). Although the present investigation has not analyzed all identified expressions of support following such a comprehensive taxonomy, similar characteristics are nevertheless readily recognizable in the material in focus

here. In (43), for instance, the poster praises the “turtle” analogy from example (28) and adds that it matches her own perceptions, a combined compliment/empathy strategy. The poster of example (44) simply expresses her admiration (compliment strategy only), and then thanks the earlier poster for her “tornado” analogy (presented in example (35)). Indeed, thanking previous posters for their analogies is common.

(43) Your analogy of a turtle without a shell is cute and I can certainly relate to it.

(44) thank you. I love your tornado red barn analogy!

All told, 167 of the ANALOGY observations function as “support only”, in that posters somehow affirm a particular analogy, but then make no more mention of it. An additional 147 ANALOGY posts, however, first affirm a given metaphor and then present an alternative analogy (45), elaborate on additional entailments (46), and/or link the proposed analogy to their own experience (47).

(45) The fog lifting is a good analogy. Slowly waking from a bizarre dream is another.

(46) It’s a great analogy. it’s like with drug/alcohol addiction, abstinence is key - NC is like abstinence of the Psychos.

(47) I’m with you on the brick wall analogy. Same for me. There’s a few windows that I can look out from but nobody is getting in for the moment. It’s a necessary process isn’t it. We need somewhere safe to lick our wounds.

Example (45) first compliments a “W4: weather” metaphor about the first phases of the recovery process, and then suggests an alternative metaphor to describe the same post-relationship stage – a “dream” metaphor from the “X2: mental actions and processes” scenario. Example (46) also first compliments a metaphor offered by a previous poster who described her craving for attention from her abuser in terms of alcohol addiction, and then adds a further entailment by comparing “No Contact” (NC) to abstinence from alcohol. Finally, example (47) – a response to the analogy in (14) from Table 1 where a survivor writes about “building up an

impenetrable brick wall” as a safeguard measure – also first affirms the expressed metaphor (showing empathy), and then continues to both add entailments *and* relate it to her own situation.

The reception to proffered metaphors is thus overwhelmingly positive, fostering a supportive online community and contributing to a common understanding of the abuse situation that posters find validating. However, a small handful of posts with the word *analogy* function to criticize rather than support a given metaphor. Even these critical posts, however, tend to be respectful and even cautious; see (48) and (49).

(48) Hmm I personally would never insult any animal by comparing them to an abuser
- sorry just not an analogy I would use.

(49) This is a great thread with really good posts. And I agree with your comment until
this part. The analogy you are trying to make is plain wrong and offensive to parents
and those persons on this site who work with children in their professional lives
(teachers, therapists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, etc).

Polite correction is seen in example (48) where the poster offers an apology even though she disagrees; even here, though, the posters are agreed in their low opinion of abusers – the issue at stake is over the proper measure of comparison. Example (49) shows the strongest criticism uncovered in the data, where the poster calls a comparison between abusers and fickle children with lack of impulse control “plain wrong and offensive”. Yet even this condemnation is first softened through prefacing negative remarks with expressions of support, with a compliment followed by an expression of agreement.

Further expressions of criticism in the identified analogies are embedded within explanatory metaphors, and mainly consist of self-criticism. We see this in example (50) comparing the abuser to a wall, which the poster herself feels is “not the best analogy”. A further example begins with the “skunk” analogy in (51), a mixed metaphor.

(50) It's like having an argument with a garden wall we can row till we're blue in the face. 'Wall' won't care. will 'wall' care if we don't speak to it in a while? 'Wall' doesn't even know we're there. We can't expect real emotions from a garden wall. because it's a wall. not the best analogy...

(51) I guess it opened up a can of worms that I wasn't prepared to....what does one do with a can of worms? If I was a skunk I could eat them.

The author who posted (51) adds an entry later on in the same thread, saying that when she woke up the next day, she “felt stupid for writing the can of worms and skunk thing [but] couldn't think how to edit it to make sense”. Rather than prompting agreement about the inappropriateness of the “skunk” metaphor, however, this admission of self-criticism resulted in a number of supportive comments, such as example (52) following a combined compliment/empathy strategy.

(52) I like your words about the can of worms. i have to say i enjoyed your analogy lol..caused an understanding nod and grin x

5 Conclusions

The present investigation demonstrates some of the myriad ways that survivors of relationship abuse employ metaphor to communicate about their experiences, through an analysis of all metaphors flagged by the lexeme ANALOGY in a 46-million-word corpus compiled from online discussion forum posts about the topic. While investigation of metaphors flagged by all potential metaphor markers in such a large corpus was beyond the scope of the present study, accessing the data through a single entry has proven fruitful. Future studies into metaphors marked by other flags might thus also prove equally valuable in shedding further light on the

ways in which relationship abuse survivors employ metaphor to discuss their experiences and feelings, and by extension, in their underlying conceptual understandings about what they have gone through. Such studies could investigate, for instance, whether there are any qualitative or quantitative differences in the metaphors marked by different flags and/or in the reactions such metaphors prompt among the forum posters.

As for the findings in the present study, three points in particular stand out from the analysis of the co-text surrounding the 596 occurrences of ANALOGY identified in the material. First, there is immense variety in the selected frames: 20 of the 21 major discourse fields in the USAS semantic annotation scheme are represented in the data. That said, there are recognizable tendencies, with some frames being more frequent than others. For instance, the “L: life and living things” frame is by far the most common, providing a productive means of characterizing abusers and their actions. Moreover, we have seen how the same scene or experience may ostensibly be explained equally well through different frames, as when the gradually more encompassing nature of abuse is conceptualized as a frog in water that is slowly heated to the boiling point or alternatively, as a clock whose alarm starts off softly and gradually becomes shriller.

Second, posters also select a wide variety of scenarios to describe (parts of) their experience, even within the same frame. By way of example, all possible USAS subdivisions of the “W: world and the environment” frame were represented in the data. That fact notwithstanding, we also find a number of reoccurring scenarios, as when abuse is compared to a natural disaster, or when emotional turmoil is compared to ocean waves. As far as implications are concerned, the choice of frame and scenario may be meaningful. For example, how best to protect yourself from a tornado that randomly touches down may differ from how to protect yourself from a wolf actively hunting for prey.

An additional point of note is that almost one in five of the metaphorical analogies in my data are clearly rooted in a literal experience from which the poster draws overt comparisons. Sometimes that literal experience is one likely to have been encountered by most people, e.g. anyone who has been woken by an alarm clock. In other cases, however, the literal experience providing the source for an analogy is decidedly personal, e.g. a poster who compares her withdrawal symptoms from drugs to her longing for her abuser, or another poster drawing parallels between her experience having lived through a tornado and its consequences with having lived through an abusive relationship and its aftermath. Such cases demonstrate that metaphor is, in some sense, all around us and our actions, and may be “activated” at any time in completely different contexts.

Finally, despite such variety, most proposed analogies strike a positive chord with other members of the discourse community. Forum members frequently show their support for each other by complimenting posters for an analogy that particularly resonate. Only rarely is there dissent, even when alternative analogies are advanced. Such interaction forms part of the negotiation between survivors as they try to reach an understanding of their individual and/or collective experience. In short, the metaphorical analogies in discussions about abuse are highly adaptable and flexible. They serve to establish, further develop and/or reinforce a more complete understanding of trauma and recovery, both on an individual basis and on a collective basis.

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