The Psychology of Love

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The Psychology of Love

Preface

BY ZICK RUBIN

Love had always been one thing—maybe the only thing—that seemed safely beyond the research scientist's ever-extending grasp. "So far as love or affection is concerned," Harry Harlow declared in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1958, "psychologists have failed in their mission. The little we know about love does not transcend simple observation, and the little we write about it has been written better by poets and novelists." Since the poets and novelists had always been notoriously contradictory about love, defining it as everything from "a spirit all compact of fire" to "a state of perceptual anesthesia," this was a pretty serious indictment.

By 1968, when I launched my own dissertation research on measuring romantic love, the situation had changed only slightly. Considerable work had been done on love (or "attachment") between parents and infants, along paths blazed by such researchers as Harlow and John Bowlby. And clinical psychologists from Freud to Fromm to Maslow had all along been recording their insights into the nature of love. But with only a handful of exceptions, psychological researchers had stayed clear of romantic love. "Why do you want to measure *that*?" my dissertation committee asked me. "Why not measure something more popular like cognitive dissonance or identity diffusion?" I gulped and then suggested, "Well, this way I can keep the literature review short."

Two decades later, the days of short literature reviews on the psychology of love are over. Once their initial reluctance to study love had been overcome, psychologists flocked to the subject in droves. Dozens of love studies appear annually in the journals; dozens more are presented at

regional and national conventions. There is even a four-year-old journal called the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* that fills a large proportion of its pages with studies of love. "How do I love thee?"—Elizabeth Barrett Browning might have written in the late 1980s—"Let me count the articles."

Research on love is especially alluring to undergraduate and graduate student researchers, who can't resist the opportunity to get course credit for investigating a topic that obsesses them in their daily lives. Studying love professionally is one creative response to the challenge (discussed by Williams and Barnes in this volume) of integrating the spheres of love and work in one's life. In love research, as elsewhere in our discipline, not all the studies have been notably illuminating. But if there were a need to demonstrate that psychologists have been gaining on love, the proof lies in this volume. Psychologists have finally come to grips with their "mission" of studying love—what it is, where it comes from, and how it develops.

In planning this volume, Robert Sternberg and Michael Barnes have recruited an impressive roster of contributors. Several are eminent social psychologists (including Levinger, Hatfield, Byrne, and Berscheid) who pioneered the study of "interpersonal attraction" in the 1960s. But current research on love, as represented in this volume, reaches beyond social psychology to other areas and disciplines. Researchers are stalking romantic love with the help of concepts and methods imported from the fields of infant-parent attachment (Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw), cognitive psychology (Buss), personality (Dion and Dion), and psychometrics (Sternberg). Connections are being made to evolutionary biology (Buss), the sociology of social networks (Levinger), cultural anthropology (Dion and Dion), and behavioral physiology (Hatfield). Rather than yielding to the temptation to talk only to themselves, psychologists studying love have reached out to the conceptions of classical philosophers and religious mystics (Lee, Brehm).

For all these accomplishments, the science of love is still in its infancy. One sign of this immaturity is the fact that the investigators represented in this volume share so little of a common vocabulary. Love researchers are saddled with the problem that "love" means different things to different people. Is "love" an attitude, an emotion, a set of behaviors? Is it an individual orientation or a dyadic bond? Is it serious or playful, passionate or sedate, needing or giving? And if, as some would insist, it is all these things, how can we proceed to organize our study of it? Because of this organizational problem, many of the contributors to this volume have developed their own taxonomies of love. Each categorizing scheme differs

from the next, and there are no ready translation rules from one chapter's formulation to another's. Just as partners with different views of love may find themselves talking past each other (see Sternberg's chapter), I suspect that some of the contributors to this volume may find it difficult to relate to others' perspectives.

Love researchers might do well to move toward a more common conceptual vocabulary. One model for such an undertaking is the systematic framework for describing close relationships set forth by Harold Kelley and his colleagues (1983). The present volume, despite its babel of voices, may help to encourage such conceptual integration. By assembling different languages of love within the same covers, the editors have made it more likely that speakers of one language will catch on to the nuances of another. Even apparently irreconcilable conflicts between researchers may eventually lead to a deeper understanding of love. For example, romantic love is viewed by Branden as a positive ideal that brings out the best in us and by Peele as a form of addiction that borders on pathology. Perhaps future researchers can resolve the conflict by specifying more clearly the links between different sorts of love and emotional well-being.

Where should love research go next? There are many avenues that might be pursued, from the brain chemistry of consciousness to the developmental psychology of giving and caring. Let me offer quick plugs for three such directions. First, we need research, as advocated by Berscheid in this volume, that connects the psychophysiology of sexual arousal to the psychology of love. Today, both sex and love are thriving topics of psychological research. (The taboo against sex research, spurred by the work of Masters and Johnson in the mid-1960s, was broken even before love research became respectable.) But whereas most observers would agree that love and sex are closely linked, love research and sex research have for the most part been separate enterprises. Second, love researchers should devote more attention to the environmental and demographic context within which love unfolds. No matter what else may be discovered about the experience of love, it is clear that people establish relationships with others who are *available*. If demographic constraints are such that, for example, there is a severe shortage of men available to college-educated women past the age of thirty, then researchers who seek to understand love must attend to these constraints. Third, researchers should recognize the importance of love as a provision that can help people get through times of stress and crisis. For this reason, research on love needs to be connected with the booming research literature on social support (for example, Sarason & Sarason, 1985).

So far, I've ducked what to many observers is the critical question: *should* we study love? "I believe that 200 million Americans want to leave some things in life a mystery," Sen. William Proxmire protested a decade ago, "and right at the top of the list of the things we don't want to know is why a man falls in love with a woman and vice versa." Love researchers and their boosters in the media were quick to put the senator down as a know-nothing—"you have to assume he was kidding," James Reston wrote in the *New York Times*—yet the question persists: will the new science of love inevitably rob love of some of its magic? More generally, might research on love have undesirable consequences that will outweigh its benefits?

In my view, these questions should not be glibly dismissed. It is easy to justify love research with pious generalities. Here's a pious generality of my own, penned a decade ago as a retort to Senator Proxmire:

> Especially at a time when many people are confused about what love is or should be, the scientific study of love can make a positive contribution to the quality of life. To shun this task is no more justified than the taboo until several centuries ago against scientific study of the human body, on the grounds that such research would somehow defile it. In the words of one of the most humane of modern psychologists, the late Abraham H. Maslow, "We *must* study love; we must be able to teach it, to understand it, to predict it, or else the world is lost to hostility and to suspicion." (Rubin, 1977, p. 59)

Looking back at my statement ten years later, I'd call it a nice pep talk for love researchers, but hardly a convincing defense of love research. Scientists who broke the taboo against dissecting the human body were ultimately able to justify their sacrilege by developing techniques to prevent and cure disease. Will today's dissectors of the anatomy of love be able to achieve comparable results? The question remains open. I still hold to the article of scientific faith that increasing human knowledge, even about so private a matter as love, is to be encouraged. The first fruits of love research, as reported in this volume, help strengthen this faith. But in advocating further research on love, we must go beyond generalities and recognize that research on love—just like research on nuclear physics or on the genetic code—is likely to have real consequences, both for good and for ill.

We may want to consider, for example, the impact of love research on marital stability. The interest in love research that began in the late 1960s and the 1970s seems, in retrospect, to have been part of a broader cultural phenomenon: a heightened emphasis on the quality of intimate relationships. As Beech and Tesser observe in this volume, this new concern with

the quality of love undoubtedly contributed to the soaring divorce rate of the past two decades. Rather than sticking with a partner for better or worse, men and women came to believe that a marriage should survive only if love—and with it, individual fulfillment—continued to flower. Will research on love reinforce this trend of questioning—and toppling—existing relationships? And is such questioning of people's closest ties to be welcomed or to be shunned?

Studies of love may have their most direct effects on the individuals and couples who serve as research subjects. Between 1972 and 1974, for example, Anne Peplau, Charles Hill, and I conducted a longitudinal questionnaire study of 231 college student couples who were dating or going together. We found that participating in the research itself had a major impact on many of the couples' relationships (Rubin & Mitchell, 1976). In some cases, the research cemented relationships; in other cases, it hastened their demise. A few of our participants came to feel that our statistical approach to love demeaned their relationships. More often, however, the students felt that taking part in our study helped them come to a better understanding of their relationship and to make a better decision about whether or not to continue it. "I felt that this study brought our relationship close to where it is now," one student told us. "We were forced to look at ourselves honestly and we discussed our differences and problems more openly." In the process of conducting love research, then, we unwittingly became couples counselors.

Playing on a larger stage, love researchers will find themselves cast as couples counselors to society. The approaches and results of love research, as they are heralded in the mass media, will undoubtedly shape people's expectations about love. If the scientists focus on the companionate nature of love, couples will become preoccupied with their own companionship; if the scientists turn their attention to passionate love, couples will become concerned with their own passion. And if researchers define love in unattainably ideal terms, they may create discontent among people who would otherwise have gladly settled for what they had. But to the extent that the results of love research help people choose partners more wisely, cultivate love more resourcefully, and make more realistic demands on their relationships, the research may increase both the quality and the durability of intimate relationships.

"Should we study love?" may in fact have become a moot question. The rich contributions to this volume suggest that, Senator Proxmire notwithstanding, the research will go on. Psychologists are not about to displace poets or novelists as society's preeminent observers of love, but the

researchers are beginning to pierce the veil of love in their own ways. As they pursue this research, psychologists have an opportunity not only to satisfy their own scientific curiosity but also to enrich people's lives.

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Contents

PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction to the Psychology of Love

BY ROBERT J. STERNBERG AND MICHAEL L. BARNES

For many people, love is the most important thing in their lives. Without it, they feel as though their lives are incomplete. But what is "it"? This question has been addressed by poets, novelists, philosophers, theologians, and, of course, psychologists, among others. This book presents the attempts of contemporary psychologists whose field of expertise is the study of love and close relationships to figure out just what love is.

The book is divided into five parts containing sixteen chapters. Part I consists simply of this introduction. Part II contains seven chapters presenting global theories of love, which attempt to deal with the phenomenon of love in its entirety. Part III comprises four chapters describing theories that concentrate primarily upon romantic love. Part IV includes three chapters emphasizing theories of love and relationship maintenance. Part V consists of a single chapter that provides a critical overview of the field of love research.

PART II: GLOBAL THEORIES OF LOVE

In chapter 2, "A Taxonomy of Love," Bernard I. Murstein presents a global analysis of various taxonomies of the nature of love. Murstein begins his chapter with a detailed review of the many diverse conceptions of love that have been advanced by various theorists. He goes on to critique the most popular views, giving as well his own perspective on how love should be defined. Murstein traces how theorists have attempted to understand love by investigating its aspects, modes, origins, and primary intended beneficiaries. Murstein offers what he believes to be a single definition of love that

can unite and subsume the great variety of concepts he has presented. Next, he discusses the developmental stages of love and reviews empirical attempts to discover whether love consists of a single general dimension or several dimensions. Murstein concludes by evaluating the utility of taxonomies of love, addressing the research on and practical applications of such taxonomies.

In chapter 3, "Love-Styles," John Alan Lee describes various conceptions of love and how to find and achieve a fulfilling love relationship. Lee views the diversity of human styles of loving as a natural component and even a consequence of our complex modern society. Using an analogy to color, he describes how love is experienced and defined in a personal way by each individual, much as colors are observed in the natural world. Just as love is a distinct entity from person to person, so are styles of loving distinct from one person to another. Lee presents a humorous review of the problems this multiplicity of "love-styles" creates when we attempt to find a match for our own love-styles in the everyday world. People are encouraged to develop an awareness of their preferred love-style and to recognize the changes that occur in styles over time. Lee reviews different love-styles in current and past literature and popular culture, showing how seemingly contradictory the notions of what constitutes an appropriate and fulfilling love-style can be. Certain combinations of love-styles are viewed by Lee as representing more compatible matches then others. He presents a sampling of his experimental methodology for the study of love and concludes by relating his theory to others in this volume.

In chapter 4, "Love as Attachment: The Integration of Three Behavioral Systems," Phillip Shaver, Cindy Hazan, and Donna Bradshaw draw on the resources of attachment theory, human development studies, and evolutionary biology in discussing the nature of love. The authors view love and its consequences as extending back well into early human history and experience. Biological and evolutionarily selective interpretations of love are presented within the context of modern human love as part of a system of human emotion and attachment behavior. The authors begin with a summary of attachment theory, which they subsequently apply to adult romantic love. Next, the authors list some of the observable and theoretical similarities between infant care–giving attachment and adult romantic love. They review three styles of attachment present in mother-infant interaction and report the results of two studies investigating the relationship of these styles of attachment to adult romantic love. They offer an interpretation of grief within the context of the attachment model to show the usefulness of this approach. Finally, the authors review the limita-

tions of their work and suggest further applications of attachment theory in research on adult romantic relationships.

In chapter 5, "Love Acts: The Evolutionary Biology of Love," David M. Buss presents an evolutionary approach to love based on two premises. The first is that love does not reside solely in a person's subjective thoughts, feelings, and drives but rather results in actions with tangible consequences. Buss's second premise is that the key consequences of love center around reproduction. He hypothesizes that love acts derive from evolutionary forces, and his chapter seeks to uncover the potentially evolutionarily significant love acts in which humans engage. Proximate goals for love acts include display of resources, exclusivity (fidelity and guarding), commitment and marriage, sexual intimacy, reproduction, resource sharing, and parental investment. In support of his evolutionary framework, Buss presents data from two studies of love acts that support several of its assumptions. He discusses specific empirical predictions that are based on the principles of natural selection and reproductive behavior underlying modern demonstrations of love. Buss's method for obtaining examples of love acts from participants in his research is reviewed, as is his procedure for determining which love acts are most prototypical. Finally, Buss discusses several intriguing sex differences in love acts and in their conceptualization.

In chapter 6, "Triangulating Love," Robert J. Sternberg presents his triangular theory of love, according to which love can be understood as involving three components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Intimacy is primarily emotional in its composition and refers to feelings of caring, support, and involvement toward another. Passion, which is primarily motivational in character, refers to psychophysiological arousal brought on by another person. Decision/commitment, which is primarily cognitive in nature, refers in the short term to one's decision that one loves another and in the long term to one's willingness to stay with the relationship over time. Sternberg points out that different combinations of the three components generate different kinds of love. For example, romantic love derives from the combination of the intimacy and passion components, whereas infatuation derives from passion in the absence of intimacy. Consummate love results from the involvement of all three components in a loving relationship. Each component has a different course over time and the course of each of the three components is discussed. Finally, Sternberg shows that it is necessary in order to understand love to take into account not only feelings and beliefs but the actions that result from them.

In chapter 7, "Can We Picture 'Love'?" George Levinger, starting from Sternberg's triangular theory of love, simultaneously expands upon its