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Chapter 8

Self-Esteem and Passionate Love Relationships

Elaine Hatfield

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Serious, rigorous research into the nature of love barely existed when I began my studies. Today one can barely escape it.

The Enthusiastic Beginnings

When I arrived at Stanford in 1959, I signed up to work with Douglas Lawrence and Leon Festinger, who were collaborating on a monograph dealing with "cognitive dissonance in rats." At the University of Michigan, where I had just received my B. A., I had worked with Arthur Melton and David Birch, both eminent learning theorists. I spent evenings in their laboratories, coaxing rats over hurdles. So it was natural for me to fall in with Stanford's rigorous experimentalists and mathematical modelers. I was also right at home with rats!

There was one problem with this natural alliance, however. I was fascinated by emotions, in general, and the phenomenon of passionate love, in particular. One couldn't really be paying attention without noticing that the behavioral theories seemed to be lacking something when it came to explaining powerful emotional experiences. It was obvious to me that passionate love was a desperately intense motivator. When my friends were besotted with love, they were always a little bit nuts. One male friend could painstakingly articulate why a certain lovely, bright, vivacious but extremely neurotic woman was poison and why he should stay well away from her. Nonetheless, in spite of his piercing logic, you couldn't help but notice that he kept one eye on the laboratory phone, waiting for it to become free so that he could call her to plead for "just one more chance." (Nobody seemed to be desperately in love with the perfectly sensible men and women who loved them and caused no trouble at all.) Clark Hull and reinforcement theory simply did not do a very good job of explaining such weird (and totally human) behavior. Nor could I discount passionate love as an unimportant topic. Late in the evenings after our work was done, faculty and

students often confided in one another about our personal problems -- all of which seemed to focus on love. For most of us, things were not going well; sometimes they were not going at all! Some of us couldn't find anyone to date. Most were in complicated, confusing relationships. A few of my friends were getting divorces. One night several of my friends complained that they were so discouraged that they sometimes thought about committing suicide.

I began to think about conducting research into passionate love. My fellow graduate students, who were mostly hard scientists interested in constructing mathematical models of rat learning, warned me to avoid such topics. They cautioned me that I had to worry about "career management." Passionate love just wasn't a very important phenomenon (!) and there was no hope of finding out very much about it in our lifetime. Worst of all, the whole topic just wasn't respectable. And it wasn't "hot." The topic of the moment was mathematical modeling. Reinforcement theory and math modeling. One set of interests (reinforcement and math models) during the daytime and another (passionate love and maybe suicide) in the evenings.

I was always stubbornly interested in what I was interested in rather than with "career management"; so I suggested to Leon Festinger, my advisor, that our Thursday night research group should set aside some time now and then for discussing hazy, half-formed ideas. We could discuss the possibilities of doing research on taboo, neglected, impossible topics like love, sex, and the emotions. He said that sounded like a great idea. I should go first. I decided to speculate about possible links between self-esteem and one's vulnerability to love. My idea was this:

When self-esteem tumbled to an all-time low, one should be especially vulnerable to falling in love. I thought that there were two reasons why this might be so.

First, people with high self-esteem are likely to assume that they have a great deal to offer others; they can afford to "demand the very best." Thus, the higher one's self-esteem, the more one might require from a "suitable" date or mate. Second, when self-esteem is low or has been momentarily shattered, one may well have an increased need for the affection and regard of others. The lower one's self-esteem, the more appreciative people will be when anyone seems to love them, and the more likely they may be to reciprocate that affection.

My first step was to check the clinical literature to see if there was any research to support my hypothesis. There wasn't much. In 1949, Theodor Reik had published a wise and witty book entitled A Psychologist Looks at Love. He argued that people were most susceptible to passionate love when their self-esteem had been bruised. Novelists seconded his observations. Mary McCarthy, in The Company She Keeps, for example, discussed the link between low self-esteem and vulnerability to even deeply flawed love. Her heroine Margaret Sargent has been enslaved by love. In therapy, she made an illuminating discovery:

> Now for the first time she saw her own extremity, saw that it was some failure in self-love that obligated her to snatch blindly at the love of others, hoping to love herself through them, borrowing their feelings, as the moon borrowed light. She herself was a dead planet. (1942;. 303).

But most clinicians (such as Carl Rogers, Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, Eric Fromm) said Reik (and I) had things the wrong way around. It was high self esteem people who were most receptive to love. They argued, logically enough: if people can't love themselves, how can they be expected to love anyone else? The sparse correlational data that existed seemed to support their contentions

and challenge Reik's (and mine). I suspected that Leon Festinger would probably agree with these theorists as well. Dissonance theory would predict that if we think badly of ourselves, we should experience cognitive dissonance if someone assures us we are wonderful. One likely way to reduce dissonance would be to assume that these Pollyanna's must be stupid, confused, or have ulterior motives. Surely when they got to know us better they would change their minds.

On Thursday night, as I stood up to present my half-formulated ideas to the research group, I was stunned to discover that Leon, who had arrived late from a merry faculty dinner at a Greek restaurant, had invited some of the celebrants -- Al Hastorf, Gordon Bower, Jon Freedman, and Alex Bavelas -- back to that night's meeting. I plunged on ahead. It is probably unnecessary to mention that my proposal did not knock the socks off the assembled critics. Many of them agreed that the idea just wasn't a very interesting one. One critic noted that in the l940s, theorists had found that rats on partial learning schedules displayed a burst of energy when a reward finally did arrive. Presumably such long-denied rewards were doubly rewarding. The phenomenon even had a name -- the Crespi effect. Why bother replicating a well-established finding yet again? People or rats, it didn't matter. An effect was an effect. Others cautioned me that people's perceptions as to what was rewarding were elusive. Would we find someone who confirmed our opinions rewarding? What if others agreed that we were miserable human beings? Was even that rewarding? Or did we inevitably prefer those who praised them? Who knew? Why bother? Why not stick to basic research?

So, of course, I proceeded to do just what I wanted to do anyway. I agreed that I would run traditional, sensible, dissonance and learning

experiments in the daytime. But I would do my own research in the evenings and on weekends.

I set out to test the hypothesis that men and women would be most vulnerable to love when their self-esteem had been momentarily shattered. (Well, not exactly shattered. Maybe slightly threatened. I was very worried that we might go too far and hurt someone's feelings). I invited 37 Stanford University and Foothill Junior College women to take a battery of psychological tests -- the California Personality Inventory, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, and the Rorschach test. A week later, the women reported (one at a time) for further testing and interviewing. I arrange to have Gerald Davison, a handsome graduate student, waiting for me (the experimenter). Since I was late, the two of them began to chat. The time and conversation stretched out. Eventually Jerry invited the woman to dinner and a movie the next weekend. All accepted.

Soon, I showed up, breathless, apologizing for being late. I asked Jerry to administer the Word Association test; I said I could administer the Rorschach test. Jerry read the protocol to the subjects, and I sent him on his way. At the end of the session, I asked the women if they were interested in their results. They all were. So I gave bogus feedback, designed momentarily to raise, lower, or leave their self-esteem unchanged. If women had been randomly assigned to the low-esteem condition, the analysis stressed their personality problems, immaturity, lack of openness, anti-social motives, limited capacity for successful leadership, and lack of originality and flexibility. If women had been randomly assigned to the high-esteem condition, the report stressed their personality strengths, maturity, warmth and openness, integrity, and so forth. It stated that she presented "one of the most favorable personality structures analyzed by the staff." Women who had been assigned to the control condition

were told that their tests had not yet been scored. Thus, they received no feedback.

In later interviews, women were asked their first impressions of Jerry and a number of other people, including the experimenter. As predicted, it was the women whose self-esteem had been threatened who were most attracted to him. Women whose self-esteem had been boosted liked him alright, just not so much.

I worried, of course, about the ethics of this deception experiment. In extensive posttesting, I interviewed subjects about their feelings. Did they enjoy the experiment? (Earlier that year, Eleanor Maccoby, who was rightly concerned about the ethics of social psychological experimentation, had polled Stanford undergraduates as to which experiments they liked, which they disliked; which were ethical, which not. She had been worried that students would disapprove of social psychology experiments, since they often involved deception. To her surprise, she discovered that undergraduates loved the social psychological experiments. They thought they were fun. What they hated were the rote-learning experiments. Those long boring lists of paired associates. Arrghhhhh.). Thus, I wanted to be sure students enjoyed participating in my experiment; I thought it probably was a bit unethical to bore subjects to death!

Had subjects' feelings been hurt? If they had known what they were getting into, would they have agreed to participate? We set aside an hour at the end of the experiment to debrief subjects. We talked about passionate love, in general, and the women's concerns in particular. We replayed the experiment and asked if anything about the procedure had bothered them. How could we change it? Because I was concerned about the ethics of deception research, I did a great deal of pretesting and ended up publishing a monograph on the consequences of various debriefing strategies.

The Disappointing Middle

Over the next two decades, I team-taught a number of social psychology research courses in which faculty and students speculated about the possible links between self-esteem and passionate and companionate love. A mini-team of economists (Edgar Feige), statisticians (G. William Walster), and computer whizzes (Susan Sprecher) set out to caste these predictions in precise mathematical terms. Finally, Susan Sprecher (a sociologist), Ellen Berscheid (a psychologist), and I decided to investigate the process in a step-by-step fashion. We proposed that self-esteem should affect people's reactions to others in a number of interlocking ways. We conducted five more experiments in an effort to test our hypotheses. The team's theorizing may have been brilliant, but our results were not.

Let us review this ill-fated research.

l. Measuring self-esteem. Before embarking on the research it was critically important to define just what we meant by "self-esteem." Essentially, we were interested in how much self-esteem people had concerning their romantic value -- i.e., how much confidence they had that they were lovable; someone who deserved love and was likely to ignite it. Did they possess a basic trust that their relationships were likely to go well?

We were unable to find any existing self-esteem measures that tapped such quiet confidence. One of our students Edward Wells set out to review the self-esteem literature so that our team could select the best of the existing measures. He invested so much thought and time in the project that he and Gerald Marwell ended up publishing a monograph on the topic: Self-esteem: Its Conceptualization and Measurement. In four studies, we decided to measure self-esteem via the measures that seemed closest to the construct in which we were interested:

l. The Berger Measure of Self-esteem

2. The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale

3. The California Personality Inventory (This scale includes measures of poise, ascendancy, and self-assurance (i.e., measures of dominance, capacity for status, sociability, social presence, self-acceptance, and sense of well-being.)

In addition, in the fifth experiment, we followed the procedure we had employed in our original study. We manipulated rather than measured self-esteem. In this experiment, then, we were studying the effect of momentary gains or losses in self-esteem on vulnerability to love. In the other four experiments we were exploring the impact of habitually high or low self-esteem on vulnerability to love. We thought it should make no difference. 2. Should we study passionate love, companionate love, or both? Theoretically, self-esteem should effect vulnerability to both passionate and companionate love. Passionate love (sometimes labeled obsessive love, infatuation, love sickness, or being in love) is an intense emotion. It is defined as:

> A state of intense longing for union with another. Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy. Unrequited love (separation) is associated with emptiness, anxiety, or despair. Passionate love is a complex functional whole including appraisals or appreciations, subjective feelings, expressions, patterned physiological processes, action tendencies, and instrumental behaviors. (Hatfield & Rapson, l993, p. 5).

The Passionate Love Scale was designed to assess the cognitive, physiological, and behavioral indicants of such a longing for union.

Companionate love (sometimes called true love or conjugal love) is a far less intense emotion. It combines feelings of deep attachment, commitment, and intimacy. It is defined as:

> The affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined. Companionate love is a complex functional whole including appraisals or appreciations, subjective feelings, expressions, patterned physiological processes, action tendencies, and instrumental behaviors. (Hatfield & Rapson, l993, p. 106).

Psychologists have used a variety of scales to measure companionate love. For example, Robert Sternberg assumed that such relationships possessed little passion but a great deal of commitment and intimacy; thus, he assessed companionate love by measuring commitment and intimacy. Since we thought threats to self-esteem might have the most profound impact on passionate love, and a lesser impact on companionate love, we decided to maximize our chances of discovering how the process worked by focusing on budding romantic relationships.

3. A step-by-step analysis of the possible effects of self-esteem on romantic attraction. Finally, Susan Sprecher and I set out to explore the impact of self-esteem on romantic perceptions and feelings in an orderly way.

(a) Self-esteem and perception. First, we proposed that self-esteem should shape people's perceptions as to whether or not a potential romantic partner is attracted to them. In the early stages of a flirtation, it is often difficult for young men and women to assess whether or not someone is interested in them. We might expect such perceptions to be colored by their own self-evaluations. In one experiment, for example, we studied the men and women whose self-esteem had been raised or lowered. We were interested in their reactions to potential dates who were accepting, rejecting, or whose feelings

were unclear. We had assumed that all the men and women would "correctly" perceive how potential dates felt about them. We discovered that it was not safe to make such an assumption. Even though we had labored to compose crystal clear messages of acceptance or rejection, different subjects interpreted these messages in very different ways. For example, after being severely rejected, one man gave a knowing smile and commented, "You can always tell when a girl is interested in you -- she plays hard to get." Other subjects had the opposite problem. A few managed to interpret even the most enthusiastic of communications as evidencing subtle rejection, pity . . . or if all else failed, they assumed a case of mistaken identity.

Thus, in Hypothesis 1 we proposed that young men's and women's self-esteem would affect their perceptions of how much others liked them. Specifically,

> Low self-esteem individuals will underestimate how much they are liked by dates while high self-esteem individuals will overestimate how much they are liked. Such distortions will be especially pronounced when the date's expressions of liking or disliking for the subject are ambiguous.

(b). Self-esteem and liking for others. People's self-esteem should also affect their liking for others. For the sake of argument, let us assume that all the subjects, regardless of their own self-esteem level, correctly perceived how much they were liked or disliked by others. How might we expect self-esteem to influence their reactions to a potential date's expressions of affection or hostility. As we observed earlier, self-consistency (dissonance) theory and reinforcement theory would make very different predictions. Self-consistency theory assumes that people will most like others who share their opinions -- for good or for ill.

Reinforcement theorists argue that while everyone should prefer praise to blame, people with low self-esteem are more "needy" than their peers, and therefore should be especially appreciative of those that provided that rare commodity (affection) and more resentful of those who withheld it. We, and the then existing evidence, favored this latter prediction. Thus, in Hypothesis 2 we proposed:

> Low self-esteem people should be especially attracted to those they perceive like them and especially hostile to those who they perceive do not.

(c) Finally, we attempted to integrate these two predictions. We predicted that:

> Low self-esteem individuals will have more volatile relations with others than will high self-esteem individuals. Low self-esteem individuals should especially like those who like them and especially dislike those who do not.

Our research team had put so much work into sketching out our predictions and translating them into a complex theoretical mathematical model, that we were convinced that we just had to be right.

We then proceeded to conduct five experiments to test our hypotheses. In the first four of them we began by measuring subjects' stable self-esteem. Men and women completed one of the self-esteem measures we described earlier -- The California Personality Inventory, the Berger Measure of Self-esteem, or the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. Then subjects either talked to potential romantic partners on the telephone, corresponded with them, or met them for coffee in the University Rathskeller. After the meeting, the subjects and the potential romantic partner were sometimes given a chance to relate their first impressions of one another. Sometimes the answers were scripted, sometimes not. In the cases where they were scripted, the positiveness of the bogus

evaluations was systematically varied. In some conditions, O's bogus report was totally favorable (For example, Os might say they were "really pretty impressed" with the subject). Sometimes O's impression was ambiguously favorable (For example, O might say that it was difficult to tell anything from "just this." Would S be interesting to talk to? "I'd like to talk with him, I think. Why not?"). Sometimes O's impression was ambiguously negative. Sometimes it was totally negative. Then we asked subjects either to: (1) assess the potential date's real feelings for them; (2) assess how they felt about the potential date; or (3) both.

We then conducted extensive statistical tests to determine whether the results matched our mathematical model. The results were disheartening.

First, we had argued that men and women whose habitual self-esteem was either high or low would differ in their perceptions of how much they were liked. This hypothesis was not supported. In general, although there were hints that self-esteem might have a trace of an effect on how messages were perceived, these effects were too weak to worry about. Contrary to our expectations, the biggest determinant of perceptions of how much one was liked was "reality" -- how much the individual was liked by the other. Scratch hypothesis 1, then.

Second, we predicted that men and women whose self-esteem was habitually high or low would differ in their reactions to expressions of liking or disliking. This hypothesis also was not supported by the data. Subjects' self-esteem seemed to have no impact on how much they liked/disliked accepting or rejecting others. Once again, contrary to our expectations, the biggest determinant of the subjects' liking for the other seemed to be the other's actual liking for them. The more the other actually liked them, the more subjects liked them in return.

Stable self-esteem, then, seemed to have no impact on how subjects perceived others' intentions or reacted to them. Interestingly enough, in one study we had studied not stable self-esteem but, as in the very first experiment we had conducted, had manipulated it. There we did find support for our hypotheses. We interviewed college men at the University of Rochester and at Temple University. They were given the MMPI, the Strong Vocational Interest Inventory, the Rorschach and the TAT. We collected teacher evaluations and high school and college grades. Some men were given favorable psychological reports; others received negative reports. In a telephone conversation, the men had a chance to hear a woman's first impression of them. When men's self-esteem had been momentarily raised, they were more likely to interpret a woman's positive or even ambiguous statements of affection as real interest. When men's self-esteem had been lowered, they were unusually skeptical of her expressions of affection. When men's self-esteem had been momentary lowered they were unusually volatile. They liked an affectionate woman more and one whose feelings were ambiguous or negative less than they normally would. Men whose self-esteem had been raised were more temperate in their reactions. We were perplexed. People whose self-esteem was habitually high or habitually low did not seem to differ in their perceptions of or reactions to potential dates. However, when these same men's and women's self-esteem was momentarily raised or lowered, they reacted as we expected they would. What was going on? We would not answer this question for several years.

The most damaging blow to our research program was yet to come. In 1975, Wisconsin's Senator William Proxmire discovered that the National Science Foundation had granted Dr. Ellen Berscheid, one of my research partners, $84,000 to further her work on passionate and companionate love. He fired off a press release:

> I object to this not only because no one -- not even the National Science Foundation -- can argue that falling in love is a science; not only because I'm sure that even if they spend $84 million or $84 billion they wouldn't get an answer that anyone would believe. I'm also against it because I don't want the answer.
>
> I believe that 200 million other Americans want to leave some things in life a mystery, and right on top of the things we don't want to know is why a man falls in love with a woman and vice versa . . . .
>
> So National Science Foundation -- get out of the love racket. Leave that to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Irving Berlin. Here if anywhere Alexander Pope was right when he observed, "If ignorance is bliss, tis folly to be wise."

An attack on my research project soon followed. Senator Proxmire awarded both of us the critical "Golden Fleece Award." Subsequently, he gave the same "Award" to dozens of other love and sex researchers, supposedly for "fleecing" the government by conducting research that was "junk." Proxmire's joke could have been worth a chuckle, except that he was deadly serious. The press of course had a field day. My mother's Roman Catholic bishop, the Rt. Rev. Richard S. Emrich, denounced our work in a Detroit newspaper. He reminded parishioners that Christ had told us all we need to know about love in the Holy Bible. We should just follow His orders. The Chicago Daily News began a daily series on the debate. They invited readers to call in with their votes. Did readers think our love research was worth $334,000 in tax money or not. (That was the amount NSF had granted to various love researchers at various times.) The answer of course was a resounding "No!" To illustrate the relative standing of Proxmire and Hatfield in the informal poll, they showed two

cartoon character's heads -- his and mine -- pasted on little cartoon bodies and balanced precariously on a teeter-totter. Each day, as irate readers called or wrote in, Hatfield's standing or sitting (and position on the teeter-totter) sank lower and lower. The final standing: Proxmire 8, Hatfield l. Conclusion: Love should remain a mystery.

Senator Barry Goldwater came to my defense. So did columnist James Reston. In his column in The New York Times he wryly agreed that love will always be a mystery. "But if the sociologists and psychologists can get even a suggestion of the answer to our pattern of romantic love, marriage, disillusions, divorce -- and the children left behind -- it would be the best investment of federal money since Jefferson made the Louisiana purchase."

I tried to explain why the study of love is important. In 1978, I wrote a little book (A New Look at Love) to explain why the study of love is important and what social psychologists have learned about passionate and companionate love. In 1979 the book won the American Psychological Association's and the American Psychological Foundation's National Media Award for the best book in psychology. This year, my husband Richard L. Rapson and I updated the by now voluminous findings on this topic in Love, Sex, and Intimacy: Their Psychology, Biology and History.

Today, many people assume that the great debate is today an enjoyable memory for me. They make that assumption because the "taboo topics" I thought were fascinating have been taken up by a generation of young researchers. Today, love and emotion are the "hot topics." But I remember those "bad, old days" with no pleasure. The battle, though it had to be fought and despite the agreeable outcome, was never fun.

The Ending: A Paradigm Shift

In the 1980s, social psychologists began to look at the relationship between self-esteem and love in a new way -- and suddenly our "confusing" findings fell into place. Let me provide the background for this surprising shift.

Developmental psychologists Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby studied the process of attachment, separation, and loss in children. Infants normally progress through four developmental phases. During the first few months of life, infants will smile, gurgle, and snuggle into almost anyone. At about three months of age, the infants begin to notice that their caretaker (usually their mother) is someone special. They begin to take a special interest in her. At about six to nine months, infants normally become deeply attached to their mothers. They smile, jabber, and stretch out their arms to Her; if they are separated, they protest. No one else will do. When they are frightened, anxious, tired, or sick they cling to their mothers for security. After about nine to 12 months, toddlers slowly begin to take an interest in a wider circle of people.

Parents and infants differ, of course, in personality and skill. Infants will differ in the degree to which they have learned to rely on the attachment figure as a source of security. Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues found that children form three kinds of attachments to their caretakers. Most infants are securely attached. They are comfortable with affection and independence. Others possess an anxious/resistant attachment. They tend to be anxious and uncertain in their interactions with their mothers. They are difficult to comfort after a brief separation. Some infants develop an avoidant attachment. They seem to lack whatever it takes to form close relationships with anyone. They are unemotional and unresponsive.

Philip Shaver and Cindy Hazan pointed out that romantic love is a form of attachment. Children's early patterns of attachment should be mirrored in the passionate attachments they make in adulthood. Men's and women's

attachment styles were measured with a single question: Which of the following best describes your feelings?

Secure: I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.

Anxious/ambivalent: I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.

Avoidant: I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.

Hazan and Shaver (1987), p. 515

People were asked to endorse one of the three self-descriptions.

Shortly thereafter Kim Bartholomew and Leonard Horowitz tried to extend the previous model. They too proposed that childhood attachments should serve as prototypes for later attachments. They argued, however, that adults' attachment styles should fall into one of four patterns, depending on the lover's self-image (positive or negative) and his or her image of the beloved (positive or negative). (1) Men and women who have positive self-esteem (the self is worthy of love and support) and a positive image of dates and mates (other people are seen as trustworthy and available) should find it easy to become <u>securely attached</u> to others. (2) Those with low self-esteem (they are not worthy of love or support) and a positive regard for others should be <u>anxious/ambivalent</u> about falling in love; they should be <u>preoccupied</u> or <u>enmeshed</u> with those they love. (3) Those who have a negative self-image and

a negative image of others (other people are unreliable and rejecting) should be fearful of becoming close to others, and (4), those who have a positive self-image and a negative image of others should avoid getting involved; they should be dismissing or detached from others.

This framework helps explain previous researchers' confusion as to whether or not self-esteem and love were linked.

A. Stable Self-esteem and Love

It is not global "self-esteem" that is important but the person's own basic quiet confidence that they deserve love and that others are likely to provide it. We must know both how subjects view themselves and whether or not they think they can trust others. When we look at this form of stable self-esteem (attachment) we see that self-esteem does seem to influence romantic behavior. For example, Carl Hindy and his colleagues tested the notion that children who receive inconsistent love and affection will be "at risk" in their later love relationships. They gave men and women a battery of tests designed to determine the stability of their childhoods. How stormy was the marriage between their parents? Did they get a divorce? Then they asked them about their own romantic histories. Did they often fall passionately in love? Or did they go out of their way to avoid entanglements? How jealous were they? When their love affairs fell apart, did they sink into deep depression? They found that young men and women whose parents had been inconsistent in their love and nurturance were more "addicted" to love or more afraid of it than was the case with those who came from more secure backgrounds.

Researchers have amassed considerable evidence to support the notion that the lessons we learn as children may well be reflected in the romantic choices we make as adults.

B. Momentary Changes in Self-esteem and Love

If passionate love is rooted in the earth of childhood attachments, it would seem that certain types of people, caught up in certain types of situations, should be especially vulnerable to the longeurs of passionate love. Anything that makes adults feel as helpless and dependent as they were as children, anything that makes them fear separation and loss, should increase their passionate craving to merge with the other. There is some evidence to support these speculations.

1. Self-esteem. As we found in the research we detailed earlier, when men and women's self-esteem is shaken, they suddenly become unusually vulnerable to love.

2. Dependency and insecurity. A number of theorists have observed that people who are dependent and insecure (or who are caught up in affairs that promote such feelings) are especially vulnerable to passionate love. Ellen Berscheid and her associates have argued that passionate love, dependency, and insecurity are tightly linked. When people are passionately in love, they are painfully aware of how dependent they are on those they love; dependency naturally breeds insecurity. In an ingenious study, Berscheid and her co-workers found clear evidence in support of these contentions. The authors invited college men and women, who were not currently involved with anyone but who wished to be, to participate in a study of dating relationships. There was one catch, however. In order to participate, students had to agree to turn their dating lives over to the experimenter for five weeks. They were warned that some of them (those in the High exclusiveness condition) would be assigned to date one person for the entire five weeks. Others (those in the Low exclusiveness condition) would date that person and a few others. Still others (those in the Zero exclusiveness condition) would be assigned to date a variety of people.

Finally, some of the participants had a chance to get acquainted with one of their dates. (They had a chance to watch him or her take part in a taped discussion of "dating problems on campus.") Sometimes, of course, they knew the date was the only person they would be dating; sometimes he or she was just one of many. In the control conditions, people knew they would not be dating anyone participating in the videotaped conversation. After viewing the tape, participants were asked their first impressions of the discussants.

Students liked the discussants far more when they expected to date them later than when they did not. Further, the more dependent students were on potential dates (i.e., those in the High exclusiveness group compared to those in the Low and Zero exclusiveness groups), the more they liked them.

3. Anxiety. Numerous theorists beginning with Sigmund Freud have proposed that passionate love is fueled by anxiety and fear. This makes sense; passionate love and anxiety are closely related both neuroanatomically and chemically.

Researchers have demonstrated that anxious individuals are especially prone to seek passionate love relationships. In a series of studies, my students and I, for example, found that adolescents who were either momentarily or habitually anxious were especially vulnerable to passionate love. In one study, 41 boys and girls from 12 to 14 years of age, of Caucasian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and mixed ancestry, were asked to complete the Child Anxiety Scale, which measures how anxious teenagers are generally. Later, these same children completed the Juvenile Love Scale, a child's version of the Passionate Love Scale. Children who were habitually anxious were most likely to have experienced passionate love. In a second study, 64 adolescent boys and girls, ranging in age from 13 to 16, were given the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children, which measures both state anxiety (how anxious children happen to

feel at the moment) and trait anxiety (how anxious children generally are). Once again, adolescents who were either momentarily or habitually anxious were especially likely to have fallen passionately in love.

4. Neediness.

Social psychologists have found that acute deprivation seems to set the stage for passionate love. With two colleagues, we tested this simple hypothesis: when we are sexually aroused, our minds wander, and pretty soon our dazzling fantasies lend sparkle to drab reality.

First, we contacted a number of college men. We identified ourselves as staff members of the Center for Student Life Studies and explained that the Center was studying the dating practices of college students. We told each subject that we'd like to know how he felt about a blind date we had picked out for him. Would he participate? Most of the men said: "Sure." While the men sat around waiting to give their first impressions of their date-to-be, they whiled away the time by reading articles lying around the office. This material was carefully selected. One group of men was given fairly boring reading material, articles intended to keep them cool and calm. The second group was given Playboy type material, designed to make them very "hot."

Finally, the interviewer appeared with the men's files. He showed them a picture of their date (a fairly attractive blond) and told them a little about her. (She seemed to be fairly intelligent, easy to get along with, active, and moderately liberal.) What did they think of her? Well, that depended on what the men had been reading.

We proposed that the unaroused men should be fairly objective. Their fantasy life should be in "low gear" and it should be easy for them to assess the women fairly accurately. The aroused men should have a harder time of it; the luster of their daydreams should keep rubbing off on their dates-to-be. When

men were feeling sexy, they should have a greater tendency to see women as sex objects. Hence, they should tend to exaggerate two of their date's traits: -- her sexual desirability and her sexual receptivity. We found that we were right. As predicted, the more aroused the men, the more beautiful they thought their date. In addition, the more aroused, the more likely they were to assume that their dates would be sexually receptive. Unaroused men judged their date-to-be as a fairly nice girl. Aroused men suspected that she was probably "amorous," "immoral," "promiscuous," "willing," "unwholesome," and "uninhibited."

We see then that men and women may be especially susceptible to falling in love when their security has been threatened -- especially if they have discovered in childhood that others can be a source of security.

In the childhood of love research, we had few "parents" on whom to fall back, who could grant us security. We were often groping alone in dark thickets, feeling our way uncertainly into new and unexplored territories. We often got lost or were attacked by suspicious folks onto whose terrain we had trespassed. But with a little help from our friends, we have begun to find our way and things have brightened considerably. And as for Senator Proxmire: we invite him into the light and wish him a life filled with love.

Suggested Readings

Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61, 226-244.

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Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L. (1993). Love, sex, and intimacy: Their psychology, biology, and history. New York: HarperCollins.

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1990). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52, 511-524.

Jacobs, L., Berscheid, E., & Hatfield, E. (1971). Self-esteem and attraction. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 17, 84-91.

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