“Love is one of the most important forces in people’s lives. Sternberg deftly reviews the diverse psychological literature on this fascinating topic, covering every angle from biology to culture, personality to sexuality, infatuation to intimacy…. In short, I love it!”

 Phillip R. Shaver, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis

Although many people view love as a nebulous concept that is difficult to study scientifically, there exists a substantial body of serious research about intimate relationships. This incisive text provides a comprehensive tour of both classic and contemporary psychological theories and research on the how and why of human love. The book is grounded in the belief that scientific research can be used to demystify and enhance our loving relationships. In addition to presenting the major biological, social, and cultural theories that have been developed on this topic, it looks at what research has shown us about such essential issues as basic attraction, the stages of relationships, how personality and environment impact love, and how online dating affects how we form relationships.

Written for both students of psychology and laypeople, the book is unique in also helping readers understand their own love relationships. Concise and accessible, the text illustrates ways in which love relationships can be measured and explores key questions posed by psychologists in their quest for understanding: Is love simply a function of human biology? What part do our individual personalities play in attracting and maintaining love relationships? Why is love so hard to find? Can people stay in love? Is online dating a good vehicle for finding a successful relationship? How does being in a close relationship affect our mental and physical health?

Case studies and questionnaires illustrate key points, and a complete, empirically validated measurement scale—the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale—enables readers to analyze in some depth their own levels of intimacy, passion, and commitment to a relationship.

Key Features:
- Offers a brief, accessible, and up-to-date survey of theory and research on the psychology of love
- Includes a scale that readers can fill out and self-score to help them understand their own ways of engaging with love
- Provides concrete, practical, and research-based suggestions on how readers can improve their own relationships

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To Bob
and Samuel, Brittany, and Melody:
the loves of my life
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Preface

Senator William Proxmire, many years ago, awarded two psychological researchers, Elaine Hatfield and Ellen Berscheid, a “Golden Fleece Award” for studying love psychologically. He argued that some things cannot be understood scientifically, and love is one of them. The senator was poking fun at them, but his fun came at a great cost to the researchers, who had to stave off criticism from many others who were simply following the lead of the senator. Hatfield and Berscheid proved the senator, who had no scientific credentials, wrong. They went on to make tremendous contributions to the scientific study of love, winning the highest honors in the field of psychology from both the American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science.

This book probably would not have been possible without the work of Hatfield and Berscheid, who proved to many subsequent researchers that the scientific study of love is indeed possible. This book presents in an informal and readable style much of what scientists have learned about love during the past half century or so. The book covers both theories and data, and provides a comprehensive grounding in the psychology of love. But because the book is intended for interested laypeople and students, it is written in a way that anyone can understand, even someone who has never taken a psychology course.
Some years ago I coedited a book titled The New Psychology of Love. The book contained truly fascinating chapters describing a wide variety of approaches to love. But the book was written primarily for scholars, and I could not help feeling that it simply would not be accessible to many laypeople, including students, who wanted to know about love but needed an introduction that was not quite so technical. When James Kaufman, the series editor of the Psych 101 series, asked me to write this book, I knew the opportunity had come for me to present the new psychology of love, but in a more accessible way.

The basic thesis of this book is that scientific research can help us all in our loving relationships. Consequently, the book talks not only about theory and data, but also about how to apply them to our close relationships. One chapter provides questions and answers about loving relationships, based on scientific research. Another chapter discusses online dating and the issue of just what we can expect when we meet people online. Yet another chapter provides questions and answers that will put the research discussed in the book into practice. You will find, therefore, that Psychology of Love 101 is not only a brief text, but also a book that will help you clarify how scientific research can matter in your life. The complete “Triangular Love Scale” is presented in Chapter 5 and will enable you to analyze in some detail the levels of intimacy, passion, and commitment in your relationships. The scale, based on psychological theory and validated using large numbers of participants, will show you how psychologists not only construct theories, but also translate these theories into measures that can assess scientifically the phenomena they study.

The book considers most of the standard topics in the psychology of love, covering research primarily about heterosexual but also about gay couples. It describes different kinds of love, including the kinds that are more likely to lead to relationship success and also the kinds associated with relationship failure. It
specifically discusses factors that lead to greater or lesser success, as well as personality variables and their associations with different kinds of love. While the book focuses mainly on romantic love, it also covers other aspects of love, such as parental love and friendship.

One of the most difficult challenges in life is figuring out whether a relationship is really working. It truly helps, in doing so, to have a thorough grounding in psychological theories of love. Such theories can enable you to analyze your love relationship from a variety of psychological standpoints and to evaluate whether the relationship is providing you with the amount and type of love you are seeking.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. I am lucky in my life to have found love in many places. I come from a loving family and have a wonderful husband, Bob, and beautiful triplets—Samuel, Brittany, and Melody. I want to thank my extended family—my parents, Helge and Brigitte; my sister, Petra; and my husband and triplets—for giving me the support through my life that made this book possible. I hope this book helps you find in your life the happiness through love I have found in mine.
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Psychology of Love 101
Introduction: The Nature of Love


John and Jane split up.

“I thought you loved me,” Jane says to John.

“I did,” John replies to Jane.

“But love is forever,” Jane retorts to John.

“But not for me it isn’t,” John replies, hanging up the phone.

What is love, anyway? And is it the same thing for everyone, or is it different things for different people, as with John and Jane? Like most people, including John and Jane, I spent more time than I wished in love relationships that proved to be less successful than I hoped they would be. Then, finally, I was fortunate enough to find the relationship of my dreams. Throughout this whole process I, like so many others, have wondered: What
exactly is love? Why is it so hard to find? And what is it that makes two people compatible in a loving relationship, or else destines the relationship to failure? Although this book will not definitively answer each of these questions, it will go a long way toward this end by addressing them.

WHY IS LOVE IMPORTANT?

For many people, love is the most important thing in their lives. Most of us have the love of our family of origin, but we want something more—to find the love of our life, the person with whom we will happily spend the rest of our days. Even people who are very oriented toward other endeavors—career, travel, athletics, various kinds of adventures—seek love to enrich and in many ways transform their lives. Love is vital not only to our self-fulfillment, but also to the propagation of future generations. At least for humans, without love the future of the species would be grim indeed. Even if couples produced children under conditions lacking love, growing up without love would doom many of these children to lives of great unhappiness and would jeopardize the future for us all.

Although love is of the utmost importance to many if not most of us, people interested in love have not always been encouraged to study it. For example, in 1974, then-Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin bestowed upon two professors, Ellen Berscheid at the University of Minnesota and Elaine Hatfield at the University of Wisconsin, what he called a Golden Fleece Award, claiming that their National Science Foundation–supported research on why people fall in love was fleecing the country’s taxpayers. Proxmire failed to realize that the only way to understand phenomena in our lives is to study them.
He started a tradition of politicians castigating researchers for research that the politicians did not appreciate and, often, did not understand.

**APPROACHES TO STUDYING LOVE**

There is no one “right” approach to studying love. Students of love have, at different times in different places, taken a variety of approaches to understanding what love is. Let’s consider some of the major approaches.

**Philosophical Approaches**

Perhaps the earliest approach to understanding the nature of love was through philosophy. One of the first known philosophers, Plato, devoted much of his dialogue *Symposium* to a consideration of different views on love. Phaedrus, for example, notes how lovers may sacrifice their lives for their love. The type of love to which he refers has come to be called *agape*, a sacrificing type of love where one puts the well-being of one’s lover ahead of one’s own well-being. Pausanias distinguishes between earthly and heavenly love. Heavenly love emphasizes the intellect and enduring commitment, whereas earthly love is more lustful. What he called heavenly love came to be called *storge* by some theorists, and what he called earthly love came to be called *eros*. These constructs endure even today.

The great advantage of the philosophical approach is that it brings some of the best minds in human history, such as Plato and Aristotle, to bear upon understanding the nature of love. These are minds that offer insights that few others in human history would be capable of. A limitation of the approach, for some
people, is that it seems speculative. For other people, reading philosophy is just too dry or dull for them to become engaged. This, of course, may say more about the people than it does about the material. A juicier approach is perhaps through literature.

**Literary Approaches**

Probably no topic has garnered more attention in literature than love. English authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and Jane Austen have written about love. So have French authors such as Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, and Albert Camus; Russian authors such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy; Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar; and North American authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Toni Morrison. Some people feel that they learn more about love from reading the works of these great authors than they learn from nonfiction books on love. García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* is one of the great explorations of love in any language.

Literature has had a tremendous effect on our understanding of love. Shakespeare has been more influential, at least in Western thinking about love, than perhaps anyone else. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* is a timeless classic that illustrates the hardships of love across families that, for one reason or another, detest each other. *Othello* shows what happens when jealousy fired by love takes a disastrous turn. *King Lear* shows what happens when a family experiences both love and the attempt to feign it. The greatest advantage of the literary approach is its richness and its ability to show love in all of its nearly infinite varieties. Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of this approach is that it is hard to get a handle on the nature of love through literature. What exactly is love, or what are the types of love? There is no easy guide to deconstructing literature to ascertain the precise message of each individual author. Moreover, some will ask to what extent
someone sitting in an armchair (or wherever) truly can discern the nature of a construct as important as love. As a result, some students of love have turned to other approaches. One is what we might call a “pop psychology” approach to love—basically, self-help books written by authors with varied credentials. Another involves serious psychological attempts to understand love and its antecedents. In this chapter, I review some of the earlier approaches through psychology (see also Sternberg, 1987, upon which the remainder of this chapter partially draws).

Literature helps us understand not only love but also the forces that can undermine and even destroy love: family quarrels, economic hardship, incompatible goals in life, jealousy, inability to control one’s rage or other negative emotions, and so forth. When it comes to love, many of us, like Othello, are our own worst enemies. Seeing parts of ourselves in others through literature can help us learn not only what we should do in order to make love succeed, but also what we should not do.

Many of the early Greek and Roman myths were about love. Some were about love between mortals, some about love between gods, and some about love between mortals and gods. These myths often emphasized the role of fate. Fate may indeed play a role in love. But you will learn in this book that, to a surprising extent, when it comes to love, we have a considerable amount of control over our own destiny.

**Early Psychological Approaches**

**Reinforcement Theories.** One of the earliest approaches toward understanding the antecedents of love was based on reinforcement theories, which are theories aimed at explaining behavior through patterns of environmental rewards (as well as punishments). Al and Bernice Lott (1961, 1974) believed that attraction, an antecedent to love, results when a person whom one initially likes either is positively reinforcing or happens to be present when
reinforcements are provided. In other words, one can come to be attracted to someone either because the person is rewarding or because one happens to experience rewards in the presence of that person. That is why when you go out on a date with someone in whom you are interested, you pick a romantic setting: You hope that the rewarding characteristics of the setting will enhance the potential partner’s positive feelings toward you. Based on this view, perhaps John and Jane, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, failed to do enough “fun stuff” together, and as a result the attraction wore off.

Jerry Clore and Donn Byrne (1974) proposed a related model. Their model essentially claims that one’s attraction to someone depends on the ratio of positive reinforcements experienced with the person to the total number of reinforcements. In other words, what matters is not only the positive experiences of an individual but also the number of negative experiences. So it is great if you have a lot of positive experiences with your partner, but if you have too many negative experiences as well, the reward value of the positive experiences may be diminished. People often tire of spouses who are inconsistent—very kind one day, and mean and inconsiderate the next. The negative experiences can predominate over the positive ones, even when, numerically, there are more positive ones.

A follow-up on such work was proposed by George Homans (1974). Homans suggested that people seek to maximize rewards and minimize punishments. But he further pointed out that, after a certain point, people experience diminishing returns—that is, repeated positive rewards lose their effectiveness over time, as do repeated punishments. So, for example, if you like to give your partner jewelry as a reward, you will need to keep finding nicer and nicer pieces in order to avoid diminishing returns, or you may choose to find some other kind of present so that the reward value of your presents does not diminish.

Elaine Walster, G. W. Walster, and Ellen Berscheid (1978) went a giant step further when they proposed what came to be
Introduction: The Nature of Love
called equity theory. According to this theory, there are four principles for establishing equity in a relationship. First, as noted by previous theorists, individuals seek to maximize their outcomes (rewards minus punishments). Second, a couple can maximize their collective reward by developing a system they agree upon for equitably apportioning rewards and costs between themselves. A couple, for example, can decide that one partner will do more of the housework and the other partner more of the child care. But if one partner does almost all of the housework and all of the child care, that partner may feel deprived of an equitable relationship. Third, partners who find themselves in what they consider to be an inequitable relationship become distressed, and the more inequitable the relationship, the more distress they experience. Finally, the more an individual feels deprived of equity, the harder he or she will work to establish or reestablish equity. In other words, if you are in an inequitable relationship, the relationship bears a resemblance to a time bomb. The longer the relationship remains inequitable, the more potentially explosive it becomes as frustration builds in the partner who feels inequitably treated. If both partners feel unfairly treated, then the relationship is truly at risk.

Equity theory went beyond mere reinforcement principles. It proved to be something of a transition between traditional reinforcement theories and a subsequent type called cognitive-consistency theories.

Cognitive-Consistency Theories. Cognitive-consistency theories basically hold that people strive to keep their cognitions psychologically consistent. When their cognitions become inconsistent, people try to restore consistency. For example, if a woman feels that her spouse treats her well but learns that he is cruel toward his colleagues at work, whom she likes, she may consider these two pieces of knowledge inconsistent and try to restore some measure of consistency—for example, either through
deciding that perhaps her spouse is not so nice to her after all or through deciding that in fact her spouse could not possibly be cruel toward others and that therefore she have been misinformed.

Fritz Heider (1958) proposed what he called balance theory, according to which relationships can be represented by triangles that relate people and feelings about people. Consider, for example, the situation described above. A woman has a positive relationship with her husband but learns that he has a negative relationship with colleagues at work. There are three relationships here: the woman with the husband, the woman with the colleagues at work, and the husband with the colleagues at work. Two of the relationships are positive (the woman with the husband and the woman with the husband’s colleagues at work) and one is negative (the husband with his colleagues at work). According to Heider, the presence of an odd number of negatives—that is, either one or three in this case—creates an unbalanced triangle. According to Heider, to balance the triangle with one negative, the woman is likely either to come to view her husband more negatively or to come to view his colleagues at work more negatively. Either way, she can balance the triangle by creating two negatives rather than one.

According to Heider, a triangle with three negatives is also unbalanced. If X, Y, and Z all feel negatively toward each other, it is likely that either X and Y, Y and Z, or X and Z will become allies against the third. (There is an old saying, “My enemy’s enemy is my friend,” which can be understood in terms of Heider’s balance theory.) For example, the current situation among Israel, Hamas, and the Palestinian authority—where all are fighting with each other—represents an unbalanced triangle, and for this reason one would expect either the two Palestinian organizations eventually to ally with each other or the Israelis to ally with one or the other group.

An interesting implication of cognitive-consistency theory is that if a person comes to cause injury to another for any reason other than dislike, the person may actually come to feel negatively
toward that other person simply to create cognitive consistency. If someone treats you poorly, therefore, the more you highlight to the person how poorly he or she is treating you, the more likely that person is to become antagonistic toward you, even if he or she was not initially antagonistic (e.g., if the other person treated you negatively but in a way that he or she viewed as purely a matter of business competition).

**Clinical Approaches**

Early clinical approaches took a stance quite different from the more social–psychological approaches described above. For example, Sigmund Freud (1955/1922) viewed love in terms of sublimated sexuality. We are limited by societal conventions in our sexual possibilities with others. So we come to love them as a way of trying, in essence, to put our sexual feelings on a higher plane. Jim may be desperate to have sex with his neighbor’s wife, Jill, but the impossibility of the situation may cause him to have feelings of love toward her. Of course, Freud lived in Victorian times. Today Jim may try to have sex with her and possibly even skip the love part.

Theodore Reik (1944) viewed love in a different way. He believed that it arose out of feelings of dissatisfaction with both oneself and one’s life. We love as a way of finding happiness in the face of multiple dissatisfactions with how things have worked out for us.

Abraham Maslow (1954) suggested that there are actually two rather distinct kinds of love: what he referred to as D-love and B-love. D-love is deficiency love, which arises out of people’s needs for security and belongingness—in other words, out of deficiencies we find in ourselves. Through the lover, we are trying to compensate for what we find inadequate in ourselves. Maslow viewed this form of love as inferior to B-love, or being
love. B-love is the love that comes out of people’s desire to self-actualize, that is, to fulfill themselves as human beings. In reality, most loves probably represent some combination of the two.

Dorothy Tennov (1979) proposed that people differ in a key way in what she called limerence, or the tendency to fall madly in love with another. People who are susceptible to limerence tend to find themselves acutely longing for someone else, to be completely absorbed by that person, and to have trouble getting the person out of their thoughts. People who are not limerent do not experience these feelings and often do not understand them in people who do.

**WHEN IS IT LOVE?**

The question I am asked most often is some variant of: “When is it love? I know I like _____, but I’m not sure I love him (her).” The theories described in this chapter and especially later in the book may help you answer this question for yourself. But first it may help to think about the relation between liking and loving. This may seem to be simple, but it’s anything but.

One view is that love is what happens when you like someone a whole lot. I will argue later that there is in fact a condition characterized by extremely high levels of intimacy that constitutes love. But generally, and for most people, love is more than extreme liking. Indeed, you may find yourself liking someone you date very much and wonder why you can’t fall in love with him (or her). Or you may find, even more annoyingly, that you love someone you don’t even like much. Loving does not seem to be equivalent to just a lot of liking.

A second view is that liking is the next step after loving—that loving may indeed be something very different from liking, but it follows from liking. Sometimes this is the case, but certainly
not always. Sometimes we fall in love with someone before we even have gotten to know the person very well. We can hardly say we like that person, because we scarcely know him (or her). And sometimes the loving just never follows, no matter how hard we try. Loving may follow liking, but then it may not.

A third view is that liking and loving have really very little to do with each other—that they are related but distinct constructs. On one hand, this can be true—for example, if we find ourselves loving someone but not liking him (or her). On the other hand, most of the time we do like the people we love. So liking seems usually, but not always, to accompany loving.

A fourth view is that liking and loving are essentially overlapping constructs—that liking usually, although not always, constitutes a part of loving, but loving does not typically constitute a part of liking. This is the view that I will take in this book. Liking and loving are not the same. But if we love someone without liking that person, we probably have a problem. We may be in a relationship that is no longer working, or that was doomed from the start.

**WHY IS LOVE IMPORTANT ANYWAY?**

With all these different theories of love floating around, one might well ask: Why is love so important anyway? Why do philosophers, writers, psychologists, and others devote so much time and effort to trying to understand this phenomenon? Before closing the chapter, let’s consider why love is important not only to these people, but to you as well.

First, as you will see later in the book, love has great evolutionary significance. It provides one of the key means by which humans propagate their species. However love may benefit its experiencers, it is especially beneficial to those who are born as
a result of it. Moreover, it is the love of the child by the parents that often will keep those parents together and thus provide the nurturant environment infants and children need in order to develop into responsible and happy adults.

Second, the value of love in keeping couples together is important not only to the children, but to the couple as well. People who stay together, usually through marriage, tend to have happier, more satisfying lives than do people whose attempts to find partners repeatedly lead to failure and breakups. That said, there are many people who find happiness living alone or with serial partners, never fully committing to another person.

Third, in most societies, it is economically beneficial for couples to stay together. So love helps to provide a stable economic as well as social life. People who break up repeatedly end up with financial burdens that people who stay together are often (but certainly not always) able to avoid.

Fourth, many people find, as they grow older, that however important love may have been to them when they were younger, it becomes what is most important when they are older. Careers can be challenging and rewarding while people have them, but most people who survive long enough eventually retire. When they retire, they may find, somewhat to their surprise, that their former colleagues quickly leave them behind. The work into which they put so much effort seems to become part of the distant past. In many occupations, one’s accomplishments rather quickly become passé or are even undone after the person retires. A loving spouse and family can be what provides most of the happiness in life as one becomes older and one’s world revolves more and more around family and no longer around work.

Because love is important to us and, if anything, increases in importance as we get older, we need to understand what it is—and what it is not. As a psychologist, I have found my understanding of love invaluable in figuring out my own relationships. I have been in relationships where the characteristics of
my interaction with another person seemed to stray from what I knew about love from my studies of psychology. These relationships invariably failed. And when I finally found the relationship of my dreams, I was reassured to find that it so closely resembled what not only one, but several psychologists had found to characterize relationships that succeed not only in the short term, but over the course of one’s entire life.

In this book, you will learn all about love and its facets. Reading the book will be a great adventure. Enjoy that adventure, and profit from it in your own life. Don’t end up the way John and Jane did!