Love stories

"Love stories" are often associated – at least in the popular imagination – with fairy tales, adolescent day dreams, Disney movies and other frivolous pastimes. For psychologists developing taxonomies of affection and attachment, however, this is an area of rigorous academic pursuit. Beginning in the early 1970s with the groundbreaking contributions of John Alan Lee, researchers have developed classifications that they believe better characterise our romantic predispositions. This involves examining not a single, universal, emotional expression ("love"), but rather a series of divergent behaviours and narratives that each has an individualised purpose, desired outcome and state of mind. Lee's gritty methodology painstakingly involved participants matching 170 typical romantic encounters (e.g., "The night after I met X...") with nearly 1500 possible reactions ("I could hardly get to sleep" or "I wrote X a letter"). The patterns unknowingly expressed by respondents culminated in a taxonomy of six distinct love "styles" that continue to inform research in the area forty years later.

The first of these styles – eros – is closely tied in with images of romantic love that are promulgated in Western popular culture. Characteristic of this style is a passionate emotional intensity, a strong physical magnetism – as if the two partners were literally being "pulled" together – and a sense of inevitability about the relationship. A related but more frantic style of love called mania involves an obsessive, compulsive attitude toward one's partner. Vast swings in mood from ecstasy to agony – dependent on the level of attention a person is receiving from his or her partner – are typical of manic love.

Two styles were much more subdued, however. Storge is a quiet, companionate type of loving – "love by evolution" rather than "love by revolution", according to some theorists. Relationships built on a foundation of platonic affection and caring are archetypal of storge. When care is extended to a sacrificial level of doting, however, it becomes another style – agape. In an agape relationship one partner becomes a "caretaker", exalting the welfare of the other above his or her own needs.

The final two styles of love seem to lack aspects of emotion and reciprocity altogether. The ludus style envisions relationships primarily as a game in which it is best to "play the field" or experience a diverse set of partners over time. Mutually-gratifying outcomes in relationships are not considered necessary, and deception of a partner and lack of disclosure about one's activities are also typical. While Lee found that college students in his study overwhelmingly disagreed with the tenets of this style, substantial numbers of them acted in a typically ludic style while dating, a finding that proves correct the deceit inherent in ludus. Pragma lovers also downplayed emotive aspects of relationships but favoured practical, sensible connections. Successful arranged marriages are a great example of pragma, in that the couple decide to make the relationship work; but anyone who seeks an ideal partner with a shopping list of necessary attributes (high salary, same religion, etc.) fits the classification.

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Robert J. Sternberg's contemporary research on love stories has elaborated on how these narratives determine the shape of our relationships and our lives. Sternberg and others have proposed and tested the theory of love as a story, "whereby the interaction of our personal attributes with the environment – which we in part create – leads to the development of stories about love that we then seek to fulfil, to the extent possible, in our lives." Sternberg's taxonomy of love stories numbers far more, at twenty-six, than Lee's taxonomy of love styles, but as Sternberg himself admits there is plenty of overlap. The seventh story, Game, coincides with ludus, for example, while the nineteenth story, Sacrifice, fits neatly on top of agape.

Sternberg's research demonstrates that we may have predilections toward multiple love stories, each represented in a mental hierarchy and varying in weight in terms of their personal significance. This explains the frustration many of us experience when comparing potential partners. One person often fulfils some expected narratives - such as a need for mystery and fantasy – while lacking the ability to meet the demands of others (which may lie in direct contradiction). It is also the case that stories have varying abilities to adapt to a given cultural milieu and its respective demands. Love stories are, therefore, interactive and adaptive phenomena in our lives rather than rigid prescriptions.

Steinberg also explores how our love stories interact with the love stories of our partners. What happens when someone who sees love as art collides with someone who sees love as business? Can a Sewing story (love is what you make it) co-exist with a Theatre story (love is a script with predictable acts, scenes and lines)? Certainly, it is clear that we look for partners with love stories that complement and are compatible with our own narratives. But they do not have to be an identical match. Someone who sees love as mystery and art, for example, might locate that mystery better in a partner who views love through a lens of business and humour. Not all love stories, however, are equally well predisposed to relationship longevity; stories that view love as a game, as a kind of surveillance or as an addiction are all unlikely to prove durable.

Research on love stories continues apace. Defying the myth that rigorous science and the romantic persuasions of ordinary people are incompatible, this research demonstrates that good psychology can clarify and comment on the way we give affection and form attachments.

2 Taxonomy = the science of classifying and categorising data.

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Questions 27–34

Look at the following statements (Questions 27–34) and the list of styles in the box below.

Match each statement with the correct term, A–F.

Write the correct letter, A–F, in boxes 27–34 on your answer sheet.

NB You may use any letter more than once.

27. My most important concern is that my partner is happy.

28. I enjoy having many romantic partners.

29. I feel that my partner and I were always going to end up together.

30. I want to be friends first and then let romance develop later.

31. I always feel either very excited or absolutely miserable about my relationship.

32. I prefer to keep many aspects of my love life to myself.

33. When I am in love, that is all I can think about.

34. I know before I meet someone what qualities I need in a partner.

List of love styles

A. Eros

B. Mania

C. Storge

D. Agape

E. Ludus

F. Pragma

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Questions 35–40

Do the following statements agree with the claims of the writer in Reading Passage 3?

In boxes 35–40 on your answer sheet, write

Yes - if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer

No - if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer

Not Given - if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

35. People's notions of love affect their relationships, rather than vice versa.

36. Some of our love stories are more important to us than others.

37. Our love stories can change to meet the needs of particular social environments.

38. We look for romantic partners with a love story just like our own.

39. The most successful partners have matching love stories.

40. No love story is more suited to a long relationship than any other.

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