

IS LOVE BLIND? THE EFFECTS OF EXPERIENCE AND INFATUATION ON THE PERCEPTION OF LOVE

Maya Aloni and Frank J. Bernieri

ABSTRACT: We hypothesized that participants in love and more experienced in romantic love (e.g., schematics) would perceive love more accurately than those who were not in love and less experienced. Judges viewed and rated a series of 25 thin-slice video clips of couples for whom their love for another was known via Sternberg's (Psychological Review, 93, 119–135) love scale. Individual differences in love judgment accuracy were large. Not surprisingly, participants who were in love at the time of the study and who reported having had a lengthy romantic relationship were more *confident* in their love judgment accuracy but, in fact, were *less* accurate. Apparently the love schemas people develop subjectively may not adequately represent the way in which the construct manifests among the population in general. Although love judgments may come easier to those in love, their perceptions of the love around them may be biased and inaccurate.

KEY WORDS: interpersonal perception accuracy; love; thin-slice.

Are expert lovers more attuned to the love around them? Do those who read romantic novels, watch romantic movies, and who have had long term romantic relationships have a special perceptual acuity for love? When we are in love, are our senses more attuned to the love cues manifest by lovers? One could argue so. Generally, one of the important determinants of how accurately people make judgments is their experience and knowledge with the given domain, and how frequently they tend to think about the subject matter (Higgins, 1995; Higgins, King, & Mavin, 1982). We hypothesized that experience with romantic relationships and the extent to which perceivers were currently in love (e.g., infatuated with, thinking about a love object frequently, or obsessing about the construct of love generally), would increase the accuracy with which they would judge the love within a sample of couples engaged in a neutral conversation.

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Sternberg (1997) has maintained that love is manifest in behavior. Couple rapport has been found to be manifest in such things as positive affect, mutual attention, temporal coordination of postural movements, and proximity (Bernieri, Davis, Rosenthal, & Knee, 1994; Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1987, 1990). Archer, Costanzo, and Akert (2001) have demonstrated that people can more or less accurately perceive various aspects of intimacy and relationship status even when presented with thin-slice displays (see Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). There is every reason to believe that love can be *seen*.

A person's schema for a construct determines how selectively they attend to, gather, and interpret information relevant to it (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Schemas are acquired through experience in a given domain and grant a person a certain amount of expertise in that domain (Baldwin, 1992). Generally, it is known that schematic processing occurs when there is limited information, little time for processing, and the observer is under high cognitive load (Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985). Pryor and Merluzzi (1985), for example, have examined the role of expertise in processing heterosexual scripted information about "getting a date" and "a first date." They found that experience and knowledge within the relationship domain increased accuracy when the stimuli-to-be-judged was complex or when processing demands were high. Schema effects were lowered when stimuli were less complex and processing demands lessened.

Interpersonal judgments of thin-slice stimuli require that complex judgments be made with limited information available within a brief period of time. Thus, these judgments should be subject to schematic processing (Ambady et al., 2000). It is known that interpersonal judgments based on thin-slice displays can be fairly accurate, even if they are less than 5 min in length (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). The thin-slice samples of couple interactions employed in the present study were a mere 60 s long and came from a larger investigation conducted years earlier (Zuroff, 1993). In that study, couples' love for each other was assessed via Sternberg's love scale (1986). This measure served as our judgment criterion.

We examined the individual differences in love judgment accuracy by assessing a number of hypothesized perceiver moderators: (a) how obsessively they thought of love, (b) how much *in* love they were at the time of the study, (c) how much they consumed love-related media, and (d) how much experience they had with love (e.g., length of longest relationship).

We hypothesized that experience (length of relationship and extent of love-media consumption) and the extent to which people were currently in

love and obsessing over love (i.e., had activated love schemas) would positively correlate with accuracy in perceiving love between others from thin-slice displays.

Method

Participants (judges)

One hundred and sixty-three undergraduate students from psychology courses at the University of Toledo served as judges. Their ages ranged from 18 to 50 years ($M = 21.6$). Participants for whom English was a second language were dropped from the analysis. The remaining number of participants varied (N ranged from 133 to 148) for each analysis depending on their missing data.

Materials

Participants reported the length of their longest lasting relationship and whether they were in a relationship at the time of the study. Participants were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale the extent to which they enjoyed: (a) reading romance novels and/or relationship books, (b) watching dating programs on television, and (c) watching romantic movies. The three items were highly correlated and were combined into a "love media consumption" variable. Participants also completed: (a) Sternberg's 45-item (1986) Love Scale,¹ (b) Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) Passionate Love Scale, and (c) a self-report of the percentage of time they spent thinking about love (i.e., "On average, what percentage of your time (0–100%) do you spend thinking about a loved one, about being in-love or about the concept of love?").

The intercorrelations of the measures appear in Table 1. The two love scales and obsessive thoughts were highly correlated and suggested the formation of a composite variable, which we labeled *Current Love State*. The measures of love experience (media consumption and length of prior experience) constituted more distinct constructs.

Stimulus Tape and Judgment Task

Romantically involved couples randomly selected from a longitudinal investigation of romantic relationships (Zuroff, 1993) served as targets. Only the procedures and stimuli relevant to this study will be reported.

TABLE 1

Intercorrelations between Love Judgment Moderators

Perceiver moderator	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sternberg's (1986) Love Scale	–				
2. Passionate love ^a	.71**	–			
3. Obsessive thoughts ^b	.85**	.85**	–		
4. Length of longest relationship	.18	.10	.13	–	
5. Love-media consumption ^c	.18	.24*	.27*	–.03	–

Note: $N = 137$, * $p < .01$, ** $p < .0001$.

^aHatfield and Sprecher's (1986) Passionate Love Scale.

^bReported percentage of the day spent thinking about love.

^cBooks, television, and movies related to love.

They were recruited in Montreal, Quebec, Canada and were paid for their participation. Targets completed a number of questionnaires including Sternberg's (1986) Love scale, which served as the accuracy criterion.

The thin-slice employed was taken from the first interaction of five 10-min interactions videotaped over a period of 2 weeks. This first interaction was designed as a neutral "warm-up" session to help couples acclimate to the videotaping procedure. The couples were all asked to discuss the various activities they enjoyed doing together. Couples sat on cushioned chairs with armrests placed a few inches apart, and were videotaped, with their permission, for 10 min through a one-way window. Thin-slice segments (each 50-s in length) from each of 45 couples were extracted from the 1st, 5th, 10th minute of the discussions (Bernieri, Zuroff, & Koestner, 1993). The first 20 s of each of these were placed in succession to generate a 60-s clip that showed 20 s from the beginning, middle, and end of the recorded interaction.

Participants viewed and rated only 25 of the 45 couples to shorten the video judgment task to reduce fatigue. Two stimulus tapes were constructed. Five of the 25 couples appeared on both tapes. "Stimulus Tape" was treated as a between subjects factor in several ANOVAs performed on judgment accuracy and confidence. There were no significant main effects or interactions involving stimulus tape allowing us to collapse the results across these two conditions.

With the exception of one larger rating session, the number of participants in each session ranged from about 1 to 8. All received course extra credit for their participation. Participants were read the following:

You are about to watch a 25-min videotape showing 25 clips of romantically involved couples. These couples are seen holding cards discussing various mutual activities (such as going to a theatre production, going to a restaurant, washing dishes together, etc.). You will be asked to judge how much you think the man in the clip loves the woman, and how much you think the woman in the clip loves the man.

They then judged separately the man's love for his romantic partner, and the woman's love for her romantic partner on a 1–9 scale. At the conclusion of the judgment task, all participants reported how confident they were in their love judgments.

Accuracy of Love Judgments

Each participant judged the male and female targets separately. Accuracy scores were computed by correlating judges' ratings of love with the love criterion (i.e., targets' score on the Sternberg's scale). A correlation coefficient thus constituted a participant's accuracy score (for a discussion of the correlation accuracy score method see: Bernieri et al., 1994; Bernieri & Gillis, 2001; Bernieri, Gillis, Davis, & Grahe, 1996; Snodgrass, 2001). All accuracy correlations were converted to Fisher z scores for statistical analyses.

Results

Confidence

Judges' confidence in the accuracy they believed they achieved on this love judgment task was positively correlated with the length of their longest relationship, how much love media they enjoyed, and Current Love State. Table 2 breaks down these correlations by sex of judge. Whereas confidence was driven by media consumption and prior experience within both males and females, confidence was correlated with the Current Love State of females ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) but not males ($r = .00$).

TABLE 2

Moderators of Judgment Confidence

Moderator	All participants (<i>n</i> = 148)	Female participants (<i>n</i> = 110)	Male participants (<i>n</i> = 38)
Current love state ^a	.28***	.38***	.00
Love-media consumption	.24**	.26**	.32*
Length of longest relationship	.26**	.25**	.28

Note: ****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05

^aA composite of a perceiver's score on Sternberg's love scale, Hatfield and Sprecher's Passionate love scale and self-reports of time spent thinking about love.

Accuracy

Accuracy was indicated by a positive correlation. A correlation close to zero indicated that a participant's judgment was only randomly associated with the target love criterion. A negative correlation would occur when a participant either judged targets to be in love when they were not, or judged targets to be not in love when they were.

The individual accuracy coefficients across our sample of observers ranged from a high of $r = .45$ to a low of $r = -.53$ indicating enormous individual differences in performance. This large range of scores facilitated our research goal, which was to determine whether this accuracy variance could be explained by the observer's own love experience and current love state. However, across all participants, the average accuracy coefficient was imperceptibly low ($r = .00$ for male targets and $r = -.05$ for female targets).

Contrary to our prediction, participants with an activated love schema in the sense that they were *in* love and obsessing over love (i.e., Current Love State) were less accurate judging love ($r = -.19$, $p < .05$). This effect was significant within the sample of male judges ($r = -.36$, $p < .05$) but did not reach significance within females. Furthermore, love judgment accuracy showed no relationship to either length of longest relationship or love-media consumption.

Discussion

Despite the fact that one's *confidence* in their judgment accuracy increased if they thought a lot about love, were in love, and had experi-

enced longer love relationships, their actual accuracy was not better. In fact, an activated love schema as measured by our Current Love State variable (e.g., someone who was in love at the time of the study and who obsessed about love often) *lowered* the accuracy with which another's love was judged. This suggests that people in love might be more biased and less accurate in perceiving the love manifest around them.

One possibility that could account for these findings is simply that the love schemas activated within our participants were too idiosyncratic and subjective for the judgment task that employed Sternberg's (1986) love scale as the judgment criterion. In other words, the "love" they were looking for was not the same "love" this study held to be true (i.e., the score on the love scale employed). It is in this sense that being *in* love may blind one from accurately seeing the love around us; at least as we defined it here.

It may be that our participants in love were more attuned to, and accurately perceived, *their* own idiosyncratic implicit construct of love better than any of the other judges. However, schema processing only enhances accuracy if one is employing the correct schema for the task at hand. Increased schema processing should lower love judgment accuracy to the extent that the manifest behaviors associated with Sternberg's love scale deviates from those within a judge's own idiosyncratic schema.

Another reason why the overall accuracy might have been so low has to do with the context within which targets were videotaped. Target couples were seen having a pleasant neutral discussion. Gottman and colleagues (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 1992) have discovered that the behavior of couples in *conflict* is more diagnostic of couple success than their behavior in neutral or pleasant interactions. It would follow that judges would have the opportunity to be more accurate when judging more diagnostic thin slices. We hypothesize that love judgment accuracy will be significantly greater when observers assess couples in conflict situations. In the present study, we chose not to assess judgment accuracy within the conflict situation because we thought the behavior revealed would stray too far from the stereotypic behavior people associate with loving couples. For our first study on love judgment accuracy, we did not want to ask naïve participants to judge the love between two people in conflict.

The age range and gender composition of participants observed here raises an interesting issue. Older participants have had a longer time to experience love and to develop an enriched love schema. However, the targets in the video were not their peers but were much younger. Therefore, it

is unclear whether age in itself would increase or decrease accuracy in this context. Unfortunately we did not have enough participants to examine this issue directly. We did, however, re-analyze the data omitting anyone over the age of 25. The overall level of accuracy and the moderators examined were unaffected. If age has any effect at all on the accuracy of judging love it is likely not a simple direct effect detectable here. Likewise, we expect that sex of judge should influence love judgments but no definitive interpretable pattern of effects were found. Males and females showed no overall difference in accuracy. Larger samples of males and those over 25 years of age are needed to explore these issues more definitively.

We should point out also that the issue of *consensus* or inter-judge reliability that is a critical issue in many published judgment studies (Rosenthal, 1987) is actually irrelevant to our research question involving the moderation of individual differences (see Ambady et al., 2000 for a methodological discussion of reliability in accuracy studies). Judge reliability is relevant when the judgments of a sample are averaged together first to form a consensus judgment before correlating it with a criterion. The expectation is that this form of accuracy will increase as the agreement among judges increases. In this study, however, we are not at all concerned with agreement. In fact, *low* agreement among judges is a prerequisite for increasing the variance in accuracy across them. Obviously, perceivers who are extremely accurate at assessing love must judge it quite differently from those who were not accurate.

Is love blind? Perhaps with certain glasses. The evidence here would lead us to conclude that being in love appears to make us more attuned to schema-consistent love in that we feel more confident in assessing it in others. The problem is that this rise in confidence may not correspond to rise in accuracy. Whether or not our judgments are accurate depends on the validity of the subjective love schema applied. The love we see is the love we know. If the love we know is not the love that others know, or is not the love that a specific other knows, then our accuracy will be compromised.

Note

1. A more recent version of this scale is comprised of 72 items measuring the manifestation of the three components of love (intimacy, passion, and commitment) both in one's feelings and one's actions (Sternberg, 1997). Participants in this study filled out the earlier version of the scale because the targets they were viewing completed the original (Sternberg, 1986) version.

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