

What's Love Got to Do With It?

G. Kevin Randall, Ph.D., CFLE
Iowa State University

ABSTRACT. Looking back over the last 20 years of co-learning with my students in the university classroom, I see some things have radically changed while others have stayed fairly constant – both for them and for me. There is no question that each year students in my marriage and family class believe “love” is a necessary precursor to one of life’s major transitions, marriage. However, as they ponder their own life course, and as I have lived mine, what “love” is by definition and how it develops may be different for individuals sharing the same age or birth cohort, necessitating at least a “love primer” for a class on close relationships. Also, what the future holds regarding a lifetime of love has become increasingly salient, as it seems to be conventional wisdom today (albeit quite the conundrum) that marriage may well be a risk factor for love. This article outlines an assignment on the definition and development of love that continues to be rated very highly by students on anonymous, end-of-semester evaluations. In addition, I share some insights gleaned over the years as to how I introduce the topic and particularly how I try to help students glean pertinent information from the existing literature on love. It’s hoped readers will build upon this work and adapt it for their own classrooms.

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Direct correspondence to G. Kevin Randall at krandall@iastate.edu.

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For more than twenty years, I've had the privilege of engaging collegians electing to take a course on the development and maintenance of marriage and family relationships. As readers of this journal know so well, these topics are salient in the mind of college students and provide an opportunity for instructors to create assignments that focus on the various factors so critical to the development of romantic relationships, quality marriages, and strong families, particularly from a lifespan perspective. And, over the course of time, I've found my own perspective on many related topics changing, particularly the focus of this article – an assignment for upper-level college students on “love” and how it develops.

Of high interest over the years has been the question of “Why marry someone?” or “What criteria are necessary for one to marry?” This is not surprising as most of my students were not married at the time and most view marriage as one of life's next major transitions. As I've posed these questions in the classroom, the basic answer, framed in various terms, has remained constant: the most important reason for marriage is love for another. However, my attempts at generating shared knowledge in the classroom have also developed over time. At first, I had classes openly discuss the question: What is love and how will one know they have “whatever it is” that is a prerequisite for marriage? *Yet, most students have never addressed the topic beyond a popular level and are surprised to learn that scientific or scholarly literature also addresses the questions.* Also, it has become increasingly common for someone in the class to voice a concern along the lines of Oscar Wilde's classic comment, “One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry.” It seems to be conventional wisdom today that marriage may well be a risk factor for love. And concurrently, as the years have passed, I've found my thinking on these questions has developed as my marriage has developed – from being newly married, to a parent, and then to a grandparent! That led me to the scientific literature, and as I found interesting work on these very topics, it finally dawned on me that exposing my students to the extant literature would move them from the textbook to original sources, and in the process, perhaps help them see that research does not necessarily have to be boring or irrelevant – another “old saw” of conventional undergraduate wisdom.

In the classroom, when love is named as one of, if not the most important criteria for marriage, I immediately follow-up with the question, “Well then, since loving another is so significant a factor for the commitment to marriage, what is love? How do you define love or how do you know it when you see it?” I've found that engaging my students on this very topic is beneficial for them and for me, even though I've been in a three-decade plus relationship. Love is developmental and the answers to these questions about love also develop over time; however, humans “love” at a point in time whether 20 or 50, and most agree that they want to see this “love” continue, not end. Student answers are typically anecdotal, founded primarily on personal experience, and often generate more questions than they solve, preparing them for an assignment on the topic to be followed by more discussion, albeit the next round with more substance and thought behind their responses. Thus, this article outlines an assignment (see the Appendix) on the definition and development of love that continues to be rated very highly by students on anonymous, end-of-semester evaluations (e.g., Likert-type responses to questions about various assignments). Open-ended comments on the class evaluation continue to nominate this assignment as a favorite. Over the years, a number of modifications have been made to this assignment (e.g., the 12 step report and the addition of the Google and YouTube search for definitions and music) based on student responses.

After introducing the topic using a guided discussion in class based on (a) “What are the top reasons for you to marry someone?” and (b) “What is love?” I then go over the written assignment. The assignment (see Appendix) begins with exposing the students to key articles addressing the theoretical and empirical literature on love. Instructors will want to include their favorites or work relevant to the class demographics; however, I chose to include, as an example, a theory piece (Sternberg, 1986) that led to scale development (Yela, 2006). This allows me to model the development of scientific instruments based on theoretical understanding. Also, in their work, Acevedo and Aron (2009) get at the heart of what many students (and older adults in long-term relationships!) are concerned with regarding love and marriage today: “Does a long-term relationship kill romantic love?”

In my early years of college instruction, I'd assign journal articles to be read and discussed; that seldom went well, even if I had a small quiz over the reading. Most of my undergraduates, even the advanced students, seemed to struggle with gleaning pertinent information from content rich quantitative research reports. A number of years ago, I ordered a paperback text for possible inclusion in one of my courses on research methods. In this book, *Reading and Understanding Research* (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2010), I found a number of helpful tools, including their “12 Steps to Understanding a Quantitative Research Report.”

The authors provide 12 simple steps with a specific question or two that walks a reader through a quantitative article from the reference to the purpose and general rationale (e.g., “In broad terms, what was the purpose of the study, and how did the author(s) make a case for its general importance?” p. 111), to participants (“Describe who was studied [give number and characteristics] and how they were selected,” p. 111), to data, analysis, results, conclusions, and so on through the report. The last or twelfth step, is Discussion, “What interesting facts or ideas did you learn from reading the report? Include here anything that was of value, including results, research designs and methods, references, instruments, history, useful arguments, or personal inspiration,” (p. 112). Often, for students who have not had a research methods course, I have them just list the page where the analytic technique and results are discussed. For students with a statistical and methodological background these steps can be very helpful for later class room discussion. Regarding the theoretical work of Sternberg, I encourage students to summarize the reading and I enforce a page limit. Last, in class, I share a few of my findings to the definition of love and the question of how love develops from other “popular” sources, such as dictionary.com, Google searches, and YouTube, providing for them an example and encouragement to do the same as part of their investigation for the assignment. I've found that adding this tempers the tone of the assignment from “heavy duty” research to adding a little fun and originality on the part of the students.

Once students have completed the assignment (usually I give them one week), the class is broken into groups of three or four to discuss their responses. The topic can be value-laden and having students first discuss in small groups allows them to voice their findings and thoughts among friends. I then have an entire class discussion, attempting to synthesize and develop an overall class response to the questions. Such a discussion leads into the diverse points of view that students bring with them to class, and often highlights their unique perspectives based on the family of origin and other background factors (e.g., ethnicity or religiosity). In addition, often during discussion students share their comparisons and

contrasts regarding what they thought or believed before doing the assignment and then changes in their thinking or their disagreements based on their exposure to the literature reviewed while completing the assignment. Typically, this assignment results in students wanting to read more theory and empirical work on the topic (as noted previously on anonymous class evaluations), especially when they catch on to the idea that all relationships, and especially close romantic relationships, change over time.

G. Kevin Randall, Ph.D., is in the Partnerships in Prevention Science Institute/Human Sciences Extension & Outreach, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

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Appendix

Student Learning Outcomes

1. Identify the 12 important pieces of information to glean from Acevedo & Aron (2009) and Yela (2006).
2. Construct a summary of the key concepts of Sternberg's theory of love.
3. Create your own definition of love, differentiating it from lust and infatuation.
4. Explain how love develops, defending your view using all materials reviewed in class, in your textbook, and in this assignment.

First, the following articles are posted on the class website:

1. Sternberg, R. J. (1986). A triangular theory of love. *Psychological Review*, 93(2), 119-135.
2. Acevedo, B. P., & Aron, A. (2009). Does a long-term relationship kill romantic love? *Review of General Psychology*, 13 (1), 59-65.
3. Yela, C. (2006). The evaluation of love: Simplified version of the scales for Yela's tetragonal model based on Sternberg's model. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 22(1), 21-27.

NOTE: The Sternberg (1986) article is a theoretical argument, not a quantitative research article. Theory drives research and this is a classic on love. You have a limit of four pages to summarize what you think are the key points of Sternberg's theory. Please use the "12 Steps to Understanding a Quantitative Research Report," for the other two articles. You are to limit your responses to two pages maximum per article. Thus, this section of the assignment may be eight pages maximum, four for the Sternberg article and two each for the others.

Second, using the "love" material in your textbook, any of the material you read/reviewed above, and any other sources you found meaningful (online definitions, music – search for music on "love," etc.) answer (a) and (b) below:

- (a) Please develop your own conceptualization (definition) of love, distinguishing it from lust and infatuation. In other words, in your own words what is LOVE?!!!! Be specific and detailed with your answer. Likely it may take at least two pages.
- (b) Describe how you believe love develops; in other words how will you know you are moving into a love relationship (since you know from "a" what love is) and now, what is the *process* of arriving at a love relationship or "Oh, I am now in love with X?"