WHEN LOVE CAPTURES THE MIND: TESTING THE MEANING ACCELERATION HYPOTHESIS

Lubomir LAMY

Université Paris-Sud, IUT de Sceaux
8, avenue Cauchy, 92330 Sceaux, France
E-mail: lubomir.lamy@iut-sceaux.u-psud.fr

Abstract: The main aim of this article was to investigate the impact of love on cognitive processing. More specifically, we hypothesized that a) love provides a great sense of meaning in life, b) when love is present in his/her mind, the subject will reduce his/her motivation to retrieve memories unrelated to love. Study 1 (N = 160 students) provided evidence that autobiographical memory retrieval is negatively connected to the state of love - but only for those students who had not initially induced thoughts of love in themselves, when they retrieved a love episode. It also provided evidence of the greater emotional intensity associated with love memories, compared with other memories. In Study 2 (N = 146 students) we tested the impact of semantically induced love on cognitive processing. Results showed that reduced processing occurred when love was induced.

Key words: love, memory retrieval, meaning in life

Work on romantic love suggests multiple links between love and cognitive processing (Fletcher, Fincham, 1993; Fletcher, Fitness, 1996). For instance, Tennov (1979) reports focused attention and obsessive thinking about the beloved. Hatfield's "Passionate Love Scale" includes cognitive components: intrusive thinking of or preoccupation with the partner; idealization of the other; desire to know the other and to be known (Hatfield, 1988). Arthur Aron proposed a model of the interconnectedness between the self and the other in romantic relationships, where knowledge structures of close others share elements with the knowledge structures of the self (Aron et al., 2005).

Memory processes have also been studied (e.g., Frye, Karney, 2004), with the aim of a better understanding of how love alters the memory relative to the close partner or to the ongoing relationship. Nevertheless, within the area of research devoted to close relationships, and to our knowledge, previous studies have not addressed the question of the consequences of love on memory per se, regardless of how people might idealize their own partner or relationship.

Many other studies have documented the links between cognition and emotion, but in this line of research, love is rarely mentioned. So the first thing is to know whether love is an emotion, or not.

Aron, Fisher and Strong (2006) suggest that even though love generates various emotions - to the extent to which it is satisfied or frustrated - it remains uncertain whether love is a specific emotion, or a goal-oriented motivational state. If love appears to be a "constellation of emotions" (p. 606), it obviously becomes more complex and difficult to measure than a simple emotion. At the same time it is noteworthy that, when submitted to subjects among a

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list of 237 emotions (Niedenthal et al., 2004), the word "love" has the highest rating for its intensity, on a 1 to 10 scale (8.74); "passion" has a mean intensity rating of 8.46; "happiness": 7.98; "bliss": 7.81; "pleasure": 7.77; "hate": 7.59, etc. And the authors were led to conclude that "intensity emerged as the most important predictor of the prototypicality of an *'émotion'* " (p. 299).

If love is truly an emotion, measuring it remains a challenge, especially if one wishes not to draw subjects' attention to the fact that love is the object of the study. Nevertheless, there are models available relative to the relationships between emotions and cognitions that could help to clarify the effects of love on cognitive processing.

Firstly, a well-established result concerns what Ferré (2003) calls "the emotional effect on memory" (p. 859): affectively-valenced stimuli are better remembered than neutral ones. According to this idea, love events should be more easily retrieved than neutral ones.

Secondly, previous research (e.g., Schwarz, Bless, 1991) pointed out that a reduced processing of stimulus details occurs when subjects are in a positive mood. Thus, lovers, or at least happy lovers, should pay less attention to details. Furthermore, if their love appears to be most important, everything that is not semantically connected to it might be considered as details and, hence, treated superficially.

Thirdly, the associative network model (Bower, 1981; Bower, Forgas, 2001) states that happy subjects will retrieve relatively more happy events ("mood-dependent retrieval"). Is it possible, then, that subjects who are in love would retrieve more love affairs than subjects who are not currently in love?

All of this research tends to support the view that lovers will remember love episodes more easily than non-lovers, and forget or neglect other episodes that are not congruent with their current mood.

The current study was designed to fill the gap in the literature by describing directly how love can affect memory. Our basic premise was that the presence of love in his/her mind, either because the subject is involved in a love episode, or because love is semantically induced, will produce reduced cognitive processing.

We predicted that love, being one of the most powerful ways to find meaning in life, or being considered a "meaning accelerator" (Lamy, 2007), would not require the subject to go beyond it to find meaning in his life. Thus, when love is present in his/her mind, the subject will reduce his/her motivation to retrieve memories unrelated to love.

To test this hypothesis, we focused on love in three different ways. 1 - (Study 1) by asking for autobiographical memories, among which some will be related to love (e.g., first date, break-up, etc.). 2 - (Study 1) by asking the subject if he feels in love at the present time, and to what degree. 3 - (Study 2) by inducing the idea that the two main characters of a story subject had to memorize and analyze are in love.

In Study 1, the main focus was on whether feeling in love would a) alter (i.e., reduce) the number of retrieved autobiographical memories, b) alter (i.e., strengthen) the intensity of retrieved memories.

In Study 2, it was hypothesized that, when thoughts of love had been semantically induced in them, subjects would treat the cognitive task with more superficiality (compared with subjects in whom thoughts of love had not been semantically induced).

STUDY 1

METHOD

Subjects

160 students (F = 91), aged 18 or 19. All were first-year students from the Department of Business at the University of Paris-Sud in France. They volunteered to participate in a social-psychological survey.

Procedure

Answers were anonymous, but participants were asked to indicate their age and sex (M / F).

Participants were asked to write down "as many personal events as you can recall, within the space of three minutes. For example, my trip to the Bahamas in 2002; my motorcycle-accident this year."

As soon as the three minutes were up, participants were asked to write, for each of these events they had just recalled, "What was your inner state when it occurred? Did you feel happy, or sad, or upset, or angry, or any other feeling?"

As soon as they had linked each event with the inner feeling that corresponded to it, they were asked to rate how intensely they felt this state. Ratings were made on an 8-point scale, with anchors of 0 = Not at all intense, and 7 = Extremely intense.

Then, participants were asked to write down as many names and, if possible, first names, of the teachers with whom they had been studying since the beginning of the year. Participants had two minutes to complete this task.

When this question was put, the participants had known their teachers for around two months. All of the teachers, when introducing themselves and their course, tell or write their family name and first name. But two months later, students have had time to forget this (especially the first name), and often remember them only as "the Math teacher", "the English teacher", and so on.

When the two minutes were up, participants were asked to answer questions on an 8-point scale with anchors of 0 = Not true at all for me, and 7 = Completely true for me. The questions were, respectively: a) "Do you find your life interesting, and to what degree?", b) "Do you find your life happy?", c) "Do you feel you have an easy life?", d) "Do you feel you are a lonely person?", e) "Are you in love at the present time?"

For the latter questions, we used a procedure close to the one employed in previous research (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2000), but we added the final question related to love.

After the data was collected, those related to personal events were classified into: a) total number of events retrieved, b) accumulated number of emotional intensity ratings, c) category of response - the classification of the responses was done by two independent appraisers.

RESULTS

Scores for the total number of personal events retrieved range from 0 to 15, M = 6.49, SD = 2.49. For the cumulative intensity ratings, M = 34.64, SD = 13.76. The total number of teachers' first names and last names ranges from 2 to 22, M = 10.70, SD = 3.89. The total number of teachers' first names ranges from 0 to 10, M = 3.05, SD = 2.46.

Table 1. Quality of Personal Life: means and standard deviations

	M	SD
Interest	4.83	1.25
Happiness	4.88	1.33
Easy Life	4.20	1.43
Lonely	2.59	1.43
In Love	3.83	2.51

Gender Effects

For females, the cumulative ratings of emotional intensity are higher than for males (M = 37.00 vs. M = 31.52); t = 2.53, p = .01.

Males have a better recall of teachers' names (M = 11.71 vs. M = 9.93; t = 2.92, p = .004). The effect is even stronger when focused upon recall of teachers' first names: M = 3.86 vs. M = 2.44; t = 3.74, p < .001.

Males find their life more interesting than females do: M = 5.14 vs. M = 4.59; t = 2.81, p = .006.

Correlational Analyses

The whole sample having been analyzed, no correlations could be found between memory retrieval scores and personal scores (Interesting / Happy / Easy life / Lonely / In love).

Then, we rated the presence or absence of at least one love-type event (e.g., first sight of the beloved, first date) among the personal events retrieved. This dimension constitutes a confounding variable, because, without taking it into account, we would have been led to mix participants who spontaneously reminded themselves of events related to love, and those who reminded themselves of anything but love. Thus, we had to avoid the risk of confusing those two groups that differ according to the main variable of our study: the presence or absence of love in one's mind. What's more, there was a strong association between the two dimensions: self-ratings of being in love at the present time/-presence of love (vs. no love) among the retrieved personal events. For those who retrieved at least one love episode (n = 71), the love scale gives a mean of M = 4.70. For the participants who retrieved no love episode (n = 89), M = 3.15; t = 4.04, p < .001. This result gives strong support for the mood-congruent retrieval hypothesis.

We conducted correlational analyses in the two sub-samples; among students who retrieve love events, there is no correlation between memories and life satisfaction, including being in love.

Among students who retrieve no love event, correlations appear as shown in Table 2. There is a positive association between the interest in life and the number of names or first names of teachers retrieved. The latter variables are themselves highly correlated (r = .86, p < .001). Students who find their life interesting tend to retrieve significantly more names. Results also indicate a negative association between happiness, and a) the number of autobiographical events retrieved, b) cu-

Table 2. Correlations between quantity, intensity of events retrieved, number of teachers' names retrieved, and quality of personal life. Sample: subjects who mentioned no love episode (n = 89)

	N. EVENT	INTENSITY	SURNAMES	1st NAMES
QPL				
Interest	-.05	-.03	.21*	.23*
Happiness	-.24**	-.22*	-.004	-.01
Easy Life	-.17	-.15	.001	.02
Lonely	-.15	-.17	-.05	-.007
In Love	-.29**	-.33**	-.006	.05

Note. QPL = Quality of Personal Life: ratings of Interest for Life, Happy Life, Easy Life, Being Lonely, Being In Love.

N. EVENT = total number of events retrieved.

INTENSITY = cumulative emotional intensity ratings related to the events retrieved.

SURNAMES = total number of teachers' surnames retrieved. 1st NAMES = total number of teachers' first names retrieved.

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

mulative emotional intensity of these events. The latter variables are correlated: $r = .90$, $p < .001$. The same pattern is found for love: students who declare they are in love tend to retrieve fewer personal memories.

Thus, for those students who do not have in mind any love event: they may counterbalance the absence of love (and possibly, the lack of meaning) in their lives by retrieving many other events that *taken together* create *some* sense of meaning in life. For those students who spontaneously retrieve the memory of a love episode: if meaning in life is already present for them, then they don't need to retrieve the memory of many other events to re-create a feeling of meaning in life.

Regression Analyses

We made separate analyses for participants who retrieved at least one love episode, and for those who mentioned none. For the former sub-sample, no significant predictor emerged. For the latter subsample, the results were as follows: simultaneous linear regression was conducted for Number of Events, Intensity of Emotional Ratings, Names, and First Names.

When Number of Events was regressed on the full complement of predictor variables related to Quality of Personal Life, the total variance was significant ($R^2 = .18$; $F = 3.78$, $p = .004$). Among predictor variables, only Happy Life ($\beta = -.25$, $t = -2.01$, $p = .04$) and Being in Love ($\beta = -.26$, $t = -2.66$, $p = .009$) emerged significant.

When Intensity of Emotional Ratings was regressed, the total variance was significant ($R^2 = .20$; $F = 4.32$, $p = .002$), but there was only one significant predictor: Being in Love ($\beta = -.31$, $t = -3.11$, $p = .003$). When Names Retrieved was

regressed, the total variance was not significant: $R^2 = .07$, n.s. The only variable that appears as a significant predictor is Interest in Life: $\beta = .32$, $t = 2.46$, $p = .01$. The same pattern was observed for First Names Retrieved: $R^2 = .09$, n.s. Interest in Life: $\beta = .37$, $t = 2.86$, $p = .005$.

Thus, Being in Love appears as a predictor of autobiographical and emotional aspects of memory. But it is not a predictor of semantic, formal, non-emotional aspects of memory.

Emotional Intensity of Love versus Other Events

The autobiographical events were examined in relation to the semantic category to which they belonged. It appeared that among the six main categories (Love, Death, Travel, School, Family, Friends), the emotional intensity ratings were highest for Love. The mean intensity rating for Love was M = 5.77. When compared to the mean intensity rating obtained for all the other categories together (M = 5.18), and for the same subjects, we obtain a Student's t of: $t = 3.11$; $p = .002$. Thus the emotional intensity of retrieved love events is higher than for other categories. At the same time, we must point to the fact that love events are quite rare during the retrieval process: only 71 among 160 subjects retrieved one or more love event, and among those, only two retrieved two love events. None retrieved more than two love events, while the mean number of events retrieved was 6.49. Love events represent less than one event retrieved out of seven, but the emotional intensity attached to them is the highest.

Thus, in spite of their scarcity, love events appear to have a strong impact on one's mind.

Evidence for the Meaning Acceleration Hypothesis

Results showed that when no love episode was retrieved, Love at the Present Time tended to be declared lower than when at least one love episode was retrieved. One must also keep in mind the fact that, in our procedure, the participants had been asked to retrieve personal events first, and to rate their level of love as the last question. It follows that a) the number of events retrieved, b) the presence or absence of love among these events, could no longer be changed when the other data, including level of love, were collected. Thus, participants who have a low level of meaning in life, due to the absence of love in their past life and to the few, meaningless, events they can recall, had to counterbalance by overestimating their level of love at the present time (which could explain the negative correlation between love estimates and number of events retrieved). The second aspect of this negative association would be that those students, who did not spontaneously remember anything related to love in their past life, but who recalled many personal events, thus found some meaning in the diversity and cumulative meaning of "small" personal events - each of them, as we have seen, being felt with less intensity than a love episode. Thus those participants, having retrieved enough data to recreate a sense of meaning in life, did not need to overestimate their present state of love involvement.

For those students who spontaneously retrieved a love episode, meaning was already present in their mind, so that they did not need to compensate either by retrieving numerous though quite meaningless events, or by overestimating a hypothetical feeling of love at the present time.

Thus, no correlation was found among the latter variables in this sub-sample.

STUDY 2

In Study 2 we aimed at testing the effect of the semantic induction of love on cognitive processing. Our design was created in order to test a possible causal relationship between the induced idea of love and shortened cognitive processing.

METHOD

Subjects

As in Study 1, subjects (n = 146, F = 93) are first-year students at the Department of Business at the University of Paris-Sud. The study for which they volunteered was supposed to help understanding memory.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to a group in which they were told to listen very carefully to a text that would be read to them. They were told they would later have to remember the information contained in this text, in order to be able to answer a few questions related to it. In the two experimental conditions, the text relates the same story, which has two main characters named Jonathan and Noémie (see Appendix 1), and the questions are just the same. There is only one difference: in one condition (n = 72), Noémie is said to be Jonathan's girl friend; in the other condition (n = 74), Noémie is Jonathan's grandmother. Thus, the idea of romantic love is semantically induced through the word "girl friend".

As soon as the text has been read, participants are asked to write down as many consequences as they can imagine, following the situation depicted in the story. They are instructed to make a clear separation between the different consequences, using for this purpose hyphens or asterisks. There was no time-limit, but everyone performed this task within 10 - 12 minutes. Then participants were asked to answer five questions related to the story. Those questions provide us with a comprehension score ranging from 0 to 5. Then participants answered five questions related to themselves and no longer to the story. Four of these questions are identical to those in Study 1: a) Finding one's own life interesting, b) Finding one's life happy, c) Finding one's life easy, d) Feeling in love at the present time. We added this question: "Would you say you feel radiant?" The degrees of agreement range from 0 to 7.

RESULTS

Scores for the Number of consequences ranged from 3 to 24, M = 8.21, SD = 3.72. Scores for Quality of Personal Life were as followed:

Table 3. Quality of Personal Life: means and standard deviations

	M	SD
Interest	4.94	1.19
Happiness	5.03	1.38
Easy Life	4.21	1.56
In Love	4.22	2.62
Radiant	4.98	1.26

As for Study 1, variation (SD) in the level of love was much greater than for other components of Personal Life, making it a more sensitive indicator of individual variation.

Effects of Semantically Inducing Romantic Love

When the idea of romantic love is not induced (Noémie is Jonathan's grandmother), the mean number of consequences imagined by the participants was M = 8.94. When the idea of romantic love is induced (Noémie is Jonathan's girl friend), M = 7.47; t = 2.43, p = .01. Inducing the idea of romantic love led the participants to produce significantly fewer consequences related to a complex situation. This result gives support to our hypothesis: the idea of love being present in the subject's mind led him/her to avoid thinking of secondary aspects of the data; that is, to aspects that were not connected to love.

Effects Related to Quality of Personal Life

Simultaneous linear regression was conducted for number of consequences on the predictor variables related to Quality of Personal Life. Following the same pattern as for Study 1, we found that results differed dramatically, according to whether or not love is present in the subject's mind. When the idea of love had not been induced, regression analyses showed non-significant: R^2 = .04, F = .61, n.s. When the idea of romantic love had not been induced, the total variance was significant: R^2 = .18; F = 3.12, p = .01. Among predictor variables, only Interest in Life (β = .34, t = 2.62, p = .01) and Being in Love (β = .24, t = 2.17, p = .03) emerged significant. Participants who found their life interesting, and those who declared being in love at the present time, tended to produce more consequences, but only when the idea of love had not been induced in them. It can seem paradoxical that induced love had the effect of restraining participants' cognitive processing, while being in love had the opposite effect. These results may nevertheless obey the same underlying process as in Study 1. The participant's feeling of a lack of meaning, induced by a story which presents no great interest for him (no love condition), implied the necessity: a) to seek out numerous consequences that could balance this lack of meaning, and b) to override an imbalanced state due to the efforts that were made to find a sense of meaning among the multiple consequences of the story, and a persistent feeling of a meaningless situation - due to the fact that these multiple consequences were probably perceived as meaningless, as much as the initial story they derived from. The result, then, will be to overestimate one's own feeling of being in love and having an interesting life. For those subjects who did not make too much of an effort to find numerous consequences to the story, the imbalanced state was not so pronounced and they didn't need a "meaning improvement" through strengthened feelings of love and interest for life. The subject could thus escape "by his own means" from a meaningless situation.

When meaning was given in the love condition, none of these processes were observed. Participants were given sufficient meaning from the beginning, and were not in need of it. They did not have any necessity to find meaning through cumulative data gathering, or through overestimates of their own personal love involvement or interest in life.

DISCUSSION

On a general level, we think our results are consistent with our impression that love plays a role in cognitive processing. The current study supported some of our hypotheses: love and, also, interest in life, appear as processes that are involved when the meaning of the present situation is unsatisfying. As long as meaning is sufficient, subjects do not need to counterbalance with increased estimates of love or interest in life. One must also notice that, depending on the area connected to memory retrieval, results do not follow the same pattern. Love, in our study, does not appear to be connected directly with retrieval of teacher's names, though it is sometimes connected with retrieval of autobiographical events. One possible explanation, as we argued at the outset of this paper, would be that links between memory and love exist as long as an emotion is semantically associated with the data that should be retrieved ("emotional effect on memory"). When recall of teacher's names was requested, if no emotion was connected to the teacher's image, then recall must have been more problematic. And this would be especially true if the participant had a desire for personal, or emotion-colored relationships with the teachers. In our view, this is what happened to female participants of our sample. We know that women report higher levels of both positive and negative emotions, while men tend to inhibit the expression of most emotional experiences (Diener, Sandvik, Larsen, 1985). Women have a more interdependent self-construal: they describe themselves in more relational terms, pay more attention to others, talk more about their relationships, and have a better memory for close others and relationship events than men do (Cross, Madson, 1997). In our sample, we found strong evidence for a better recall of teachers' names among male students; the effect is even stronger for first names. Their recall was not affected by the absence of personal relation with the teacher, while females' recall was. We also found evidence for a better recall of autobiographical events among female students.

Our results lend clear support to the hypothesis that love is associated with the highest emotional intensity among autobiographical events. They also provided support for reduced processing of details when the idea of love was induced.

Studies 1 and 2 provide support for a theoretical explanation based on existing knowledge. Love was referred to as a prototype (Fitness, Fletcher, 1993) or as a script (Fitness, 1996). Individuals hold theories about the nature of love and about the interaction sequences that *should* unfold over time. Those knowledge structures influence the way emotions are perceived, interpreted and expressed. Moreover, it is now well established (Berkowitz, 2000) that affective states can influence memory; and "people's current feelings are especially likely to help the recollection of earlier information acquired in the same feeling state" (Berkowitz, 2000, p. 75). The consequences of the above-mentioned statements might be that people who declare themselves to be currently in love do not intend to engage in complex and lengthy reasoning which, most probably, is not part of the prototype of love. Moreover, when they are asked to retrieve memories of previous events, they tend to retrieve specifically love-prototypical events which, as we have seen, are quite scarce. Therefore, the total number of events retrieved tends to be lower.

Further investigation is nevertheless needed, in order to clarify the "balance hypothesis" that could explain links between a) former love and love at present, b) induced love and personal love. Future research would also benefit from examining closely the affective valence of each recall context; these contexts, either personal or impersonal, appear to modify the retrieval process.

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APPENDIX 1

Text read to participants of Study 2 in the *Romantic love* condition. In the *No romantic love* condition, the word "girl friend" is replaced by the word "grandmother".

Appendix continues

Appendix 1 (continued)

Noémie is Jonathan's girl friend. The affection and attachment that unite them make their relationship unique in their opinion. Their complicity, their feeling of being understood without words, their sorrow when they can't meet for a long period, everything proves an intense relationship, a sincere and reciprocal love.

One day, Jonathan and Noémie must take the train, having both a lot of baggage, together with their dog Arthur. Jonathan helps Noémie to carry her baggage but as soon as the train leaves the station, they realize they have left on the platform a bag lent to Jonathan by one of his friends.

In a panic, Jonathan is about to push the emergency button to stop the train. As it has only covered a very short distance, it would be possible to find the bag before it is stolen by a thief or is destroyed by a bomb disposal expert. Noémie urges Jonathan not to push the emergency button but rather ask an inspector to get in touch with the station so that his colleagues will pick up the bag. Jonathan answers her that, anyway, it's her fault, that if she did not have so much baggage, he wouldn't have forgotten the computer on the platform. Noémie gets annoyed and shouts that she is tired of listening to such stupid arguments and that he will have to manage alone.

KEĎ LÁSKA OPANTÁ MYSEĽ: TESTOVANIE VÝZNAMU AKCELERAČNÁ HYPOTÉZA

L. L a m y

Súhrn: Hlavným zámerom článku bolo sledovať vplyv lásky na kognitívne procesy. Predpokladali sme, že a) láska dáva životu obrovský pocit zmyslu života, b) keď má človek hlavu plnú lásky, bude menej motivovaný zaoberať sa myšlienkami nesúvisiacimi s láskou. Prvá štúdia (n = 160 študentov) poskytla dôkaz, že autobiografické spomienky sa negatívne spájajú s láskou - ale iba u tých osôb, ktoré si spočiatku sami nepomysleli na lásku, keď spomínali na milostnú epizódu. Štúdia taktiež poskytla dôkazy o intenzívnejších emóciách pri spomienkach na lásku v porovnaní s ostatnými spomienkami. V 2. štúdii (n = 146 študentov) sme testovali vplyv sémanticky navodenej lásky na kognitívne procesy. Výsledky ukázali, že pri navodenej láske sa znížila intenzita týchto procesov.