

LOVE IN THE LABORATORY

BY MATT CRENSON

The writer is science editor of The Associated Press.

LONELY hearts could be quickened by news from the psychology lab: Love ain't so grand, it's just another way to perpetuate the species.

From an evolutionary perspective, the experience of love — the swooning, the fawning, the gushing — is just nature's way of getting people to mate efficiently. By taking that point of view, scientists are learning quite a bit about what love is, how it happens and even why it can be so unpleasant.

"It's a bad design for modern living," said Helen Fisher, an anthropology professor at Rutgers University. "But it was probably an efficient design to take advantage of mating opportunities in our evolutionary past."

Fisher is doing brain scans of people in love to see if the emotion has specific neurological roots.

"We have begun putting infatuated people in a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine," she reported recently at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which met in Seattle.

That research hasn't yielded anything other than giggles yet, but it looks promising.

Feelings like lust may be driven by hormones, Fisher speculated. And infatuation may have something to do with brain chemicals that affect mood, sleep, appetite and other basic functions. If that's true, maybe it will explain why people who are falling in love act so weird.

University of New Mexico biology professor Randy Thornhill further demystified romantic love by sharing the results of his experiments on body symmetry. Symmetry in the body and face signals a good set of genes, Thornhill claims, and that leads people, especially women, to seek out a partner with symmetric features.

"A symmetric individual is a good mate choice, so the theory goes," Thornhill said.

And symmetric males seem especially good at mating. In 16 studies by Thornhill and other researchers that looked at the symmetry of the face, ears, elbows, wrists, hands, feet and ankles, more symmetric males were found to have had a greater number of sexual partners, more infidelities and less of an investment in their romantic relationships. They also tended to lose their virginity at a younger age than their less symmetric counterparts, engaged in sex earlier in their relationships and brought their partners to orgasm more often during sexual intercourse.

And they lied more.

"Symmetric men say that they're going to be at the library," Thornhill said, "when they're really off copulating."

There's a dark side to the evolutionary basis of love as well.

Stephen Emlen of Cornell University believes evolution may help explain why stepparents are thought to commit more abuse than their biological counterparts and why stepfamilies in general are thought to be less stable.

Emlen thinks that's because stepparents have no genetic relationship to their children, so they don't develop the same kind of bonds they would if they truly were kin.

"I think that the evolutionary approach has a great deal to offer," Emlen said, adding that his research could make some stepfamilies happier by helping them recognize what kind of problems may arise. "You can anticipate where the flashpoints are going to be."

Although evolutionary explanations of human behavior are interesting and useful, it is important not to make too much of them, said Roger Masters of Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H. Facial symmetry, brain scans and the like shed light on love but fall far short of explaining everything about it.

"It's not that there's one pathway from here to there," Masters said. "It's a tremendous mistake to look at things in isolation."

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