

Is There A Right Way to Love? : Mindset in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract: Romantic relationships are a very integral and fascinating aspect of life, and have been the subject of interest for poets, philosophers and psychologists alike since time immemorial. In spite of all of humanity's efforts to understand romantic relationships, there's no known formula to lasting love. Yet, efforts to understand love, to comprehend why some loves last and some don't, continue. New concepts keep entering the arena to explain love, and one such concept that has garnered much interest in recent times is Mindset. Though popularly associated with professional success, Mindset can make a difference in interpersonal relationships too (Dweck, 2006). The present study is an attempt to explore the role of Mindset in perceptions of one's romantic relationship. In order to generate a holistic understanding, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were undertaken. The sample comprised of 30 people between 18 to 50 years who had been in a romantic relationship sometime in their life, in the past or currently. The participants submitted two sets of data- a narrative enquiry in the form of life stories, visual narrative data etc, and responses to three questionnaires: Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996), Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) and the Implicit Theory of Relationships (destiny vs. growth) Scale (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002). The qualitative data underwent Thematic Analysis and the quantitative data were analyzed using inferential statistics. Findings suggested that participants who have a growth mindset derive greater satisfaction from their romantic relationships and are less sensitive to rejection. This study has implications for all stakeholders working with interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Romantic relationships, growth mindset, fixed mindset, love

"As you read this introduction, someone, somewhere, is falling in love... No matter what we do, love saturates our lives in every possible way. Even when we try to escape, it finds us- if merely to tease us with what we could have had" (Van Booy, 2010; p.1). Encounters with love could be easy or challenging, at a glance or gradual, but the experience of love is perhaps ubiquitous. Be it a mother's unshakeable devotion for her child, or a child's love for her pet, or the sensual love one has for their partner, who has *not* witnessed love? Keeping aside real life for a moment, there's no dearth of portrayal of love in reel life as well. Who among us has not seen classic movies that talk about 'true' love between the protagonists who are ready to sacrifice everything for their partner and the relationship? The undying love between 'Jack and Rose' in *Titanic* will always be engraved in people's hearts, and even though their ship sank, the stream of their love still flows silently in the reverberating memory of many. As for Indian movies, we have our own fair share of iconic love stories with 'Salim and Anarkali' and 'Raj and Simran' amongst many others.

Basically 'love' is not just an emotion but perhaps, one of the most recurrent underlying themes for poets, philosophers and writers alike since time immemorial. In fact, it is also a timeworn theme in the field of Psychology tracing back from Freudian projections of one's sexual envy in the form of Oedipal/Electra complex (Freud, 1913) to its subtle presence in Maslow's Belongingness needs(1943) to its explanation from a psychobiological or an evolutionary perspective that has been a popular area of interest for researchers in the last few decades (Boer, Buel & Horst, 2011; Carter, 1998; Gibson, 2015).

Moreover, the void of love and interpersonal issues in romantic relationships are very often the key reasons for most people being unhappy in their lives or seeking individual and couple counseling. In many cases, a nexus of unfulfilling romantic relationships, low self-esteem, low sense of self efficacy and glorified expectations from one's partner and the relationship, operate as a vicious cycle. It can be argued that this emanates from faulty cognitions and leads to a frustrated sense of self. Aaron Beck (1991), the pioneer of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, would say that like everything else, the perception of one's romantic partner and one's relationship depends a lot on the individual's thinking. Carl Roger's theory of a 'growth promoting climate' (1962) where individuals experiencing a

relationship of empathy, genuineness and congruence tend to evolve into more fully functioning persons, is the core of therapeutic transformation and recovery for Client Centered Therapy. The trust and security experienced within such a therapeutic relationship becomes an emotionally corrective experience, and creates a significant change in the self-concept of the individual. So, we can say with conviction that there's an integral role of a 'significant other' in most of our lives. But now the question arises: how do we perceive that 'special one' and what influences all the expectations we have from him/her and the relationship? One way of answering these questions lies in the concept of 'Mindset' as proposed by Dr. Carol S. Dweck.

1. EMBRACING THE WORLD OF MINDSETS.

The belief that one's abilities are carved in stone and cannot be altered comes from a fixed mindset. On the other hand, the growth mindset is based on the belief that one's abilities are malleable and can grow over time. Instead of attaching a defining label to one's skill-set and competencies, people with the growth mindset have the inherent determination to do better and better, and even surpass their own selves through years of passion, toil, and training. Growth mindset is directly related with the sphere of Positive Psychology. The belief that one's skill set is not something he/she is born with and is rather something that can be honed over time creates an inclination towards hard work and may foster resilience and grit. It can ignite the spark of hope and optimism in a person and make them feel empowered to work on themselves and sharpen their axe instead of thinking it to be rusted and discarding it away. Having discussed the two mindsets and what impact they create on one's view of the world, let's ponder over them as the key catalysts in defining the realm of love and romance, and ultimately romantic relationships.

2. ROMANTIC RELATIONS: MINDSETS IN LOVE (OR NOT).

Perception towards the same relationship could be distinct for both the partners, due to different personalities and *mindsets*. Talking about mindsets in the context of romantic relationships, having a fixed mindset means believing that one's personal traits, those of one's partner and the nature of the relationship; all are fixed / unchangeable. The growth mindset says all of these things can be developed. Oneself, one's partner and the nature of one's relationship- all have the potential of growth and refinement. In a fixed mindset, the ideal is to share a perfect relationship viewing it from rose-tinted glasses. Such a mindset believes in "...and they lived happily together, ever after" (Dweck, 2017). On the other hand, a growth mindset is aware of all the possible problems, conflicts and issues that might turn up in the due course of one's relationship and yearns to sail through them successfully whilst not imposing the onus of the problems or the blame on one's partner and circumstances. For such a person, the motto is "...and they worked happily together, ever after" (Dweck, 2017). By 'worked' the implication is to solve the problems together as a couple and to share the burden when the roads get tough and the skies get rough.

Partners with a growth mindset act as the facilitator to their respective partner's path of progress and development. Instead of being envious or judgmental about their 'other half', they tend to be their best critics and help them reach their own goals and fulfill their own potential. A study by Knee et al. (2004) on Implicit Theories of Relationships (belief that attributes are fixed/destined vs. the belief that attributes are developed/grown) is relevant here. The study showed that implicit theories of relationships moderate the way in which perceptions of our partner and our relationship relate to our satisfaction. For example, destiny and growth beliefs have been found to moderate the association between viewing one's partner as less than ideal and feeling satisfied in the relationship. In an independent line of research, there is found support for how relationship theories moderate the link between perceptions and outcomes, and the link between perceptions and forgiveness after transgressions (Burnette and Franiuk, 2010).

Hence, with this knowledge of how each mindset operates in romantic relationships, the present study delves deeper to unravel the mysteries related to love, romance and the experience of a fulfilling relationship. Firstly, it aims to examine the effect of possessing a fixed or a growth mindset on how sensitive people are to rejection in relationships. Secondly, it attempts to relate the amount of satisfaction a person reports to derive from his/her most cherished relationship with the kind of orientation he/she has towards love and their partner vis-à-vis destiny

based (fixed) orientation and growth orientation. So, let's embark on this beautiful journey of deciphering the exquisite complexities of romantic relationships. As Lewis and colleagues eloquently remark, "As individuals and as a culture, our chance for happiness depends on our ability to decipher a hidden world that revolves— invisibly, improbably, inexorably—around love" (Lewis, Amini&Lannon, 2001). This study is a modest attempt in the same direction.

3. METHODS

Aim

To attempt to explore the role of mindset in perceptions of one's romantic relationship.

Objectives

- a. To study the inter-relationship between Rejection Sensitivity, Relationship satisfaction and the Implicit Theories of Relationships.
- b. To gather narratives on people's journey in relationships and to examine their journey through the lens of their mindset.

Profiles of Respondents

Respondents were chosen on the basis of the following criteria:

- i. Aged between 18-60 years.
- ii. Had been in one (or more) committed intimate romantic relationship(s) at some point in their life.

4. METHODS OF ENQUIRY.

Considering the aim of the study, it was deliberated that a concoction of qualitative as well as quantitative approaches shall yield holistic results. For the purpose of quantitative data collection and analysis, a questionnaire was formed which consisted of the following three tools:

Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996.)

The ARSQ is a self report measure that asks respondents to indicate their degree of concern and anxiety about the outcomes of 18 situations (e.g., after a bitter argument, "How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your significant other would want to make up with you?"), and their expectations of acceptance/rejection in such situations. The responses are administered on a 6 point likert-type scale with '1' being 'very unlikely' and '6' being 'very likely'.

The test has a high internal consistency ($\alpha=0.81$). The Test-retest reliability ($n=104$) is reported to be 0.83. The authors also reported that the validity of the ARSQ was supported by its ability to reflect the individual differences in rejection sensitivity associated with serious forms of psychopathology in which rejection concerns are prominent (Berenson, Gyurak, Downey et al., 2009).

Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988).

This consists of 7 items in all which measure one's level of satisfaction derived from one's romantic relationship as well as partner. The responses could be graded on a 5 point scale, with a higher score indicating higher level of satisfaction. Internal consistency of the current version of the RAS is high ($\alpha = .86$) and best represented by a one-factor model (Hendrick, 1988).

The Implicit Theory of Relationships (destiny vs. growth) Scale (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002)

The scale consists of 22 items with various statements about romantic relationships. The responses are marked on a 7 point likert-type scale with '1' indicating 'strongly disagree' and '7' indicating 'strongly agree'. The scoring is done separately and computed for separate destiny and growth scores. The test-retest reliability found out to be .52 and .40 for destiny and growth, respectively (Knee, 1996).

Qualitative Data

Using the lens of narrative enquiry, qualitative data were collected. "The narrative enquiry is a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening" (Sarbin, 1986). Different forms of narrative enquiry have been used in the present study:

Life Story narrative research (also known as life narratives), the narrative study of lives and personal history, is a 'method of looking at life as a whole and of carrying out an in-depth study of individual lives' (Atkinson, 2012). This is done by either written narratives or interviews in the form of guided conversations.

In arts-based narrative enquiry, the arts accompany narratives to convey the meaning of the stories told and retold. To use art as a mode of narrative enquiry is to move toward a research paradigm in which ideas are as important as forms, the viewer's perceptions as important as the artist-researcher's intentions, and the language and emotions of art as important as its aesthetic qualities (Bochner & Ellis, 2003).

Triangulation.

In order to ensure substantial outcomes of the study, the method of triangulation has been used. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999) identified four types of triangulation: (a) method triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) data source triangulation.

The present study makes use of methodological triangulation which involves the usage of more than one method of gathering data in order to minimize procedural bias. The different used methods include questionnaire, interviews, visual narratives etc.

Sample.

A sample of 30 respondents, 18 women and 12 men were included in the study. All the respondents are currently residing in Delhi and have been in at least one romantic relationship in their life. The sampling method was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling (or chain-referral sampling) is a non-probability technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. Thus the sample group is said to grow like a rolling snowball.

Process of Data Collection.

Firstly, all the respondents were personally contacted by the researcher and written consent was taken from them. They were assured of the confidentiality of results and also, of the right to leave the study at any given point of time, if they felt uncomfortable. To begin with, they were asked to give an account of their journey of the most cherished romantic relationship they had ever been in. Participants submitted their responses for this using a medium of their choice including life stories and visual narratives; some preferred to give interviews that took the form of guided conversations. They were then given the questionnaires to fill.

5. RESULTS

The first research objective was to explore and study the inter-relationship between the aspects of Rejection Sensitivity, Relationship satisfaction and the Implicit Theories of Relationships (fixed vs. growth mindset). The quantitative data were analyzed by the means of Pearson's correlation and linear regression. Table 1 shows the various correlation values. It can be seen that correlation between the scores on the Relationship Assessment Scale and that of Rejection Sensitivity was found to be significant, $r(30) = -0.415$, at $p=0.05$. Similarly, correlation between the scores on the Relationship Assessment Scale and the growth mindset scores was also significant, $r(30) = 0.397$, at $p=0.05$.

Table 1: Correlations among the participants' scores on the three scales for the total sample (n=30)

	RAS Total	Destiny Score	Growth Score	Rejection Sensitivity
RAS Total	1	-.179	.397*	-.415*
Destiny Score	-.179	1	.271	-.120
Growth Score	.397*	.271	1	-.184
Rejection Sensitivity	-.415*	-.120	-.184	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

After analyzing the correlation values, a linear regression analysis was done.

Table 2: Simple Regression analysis

Predictor	Criteria	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Sig. F Change
Growth belief	RAS scores	.397	.158	.128	.030*
	Rejection Sensitivity	.184	.034	-.001	.330
Rejection Sensitivity	RAS	.415	.172	.142	.023*

*significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

From Table 2, it can be seen that the adjusted R square value for the effect of growth belief scores on that of Relationship Assessment scale is equal to 0.158 which suggests that growth belief scores account for 15.8 percent of the variation in RAS scores, at p=0.05. The outcome of growth belief scores on Rejection sensitivity is insignificant. Table 2 also shows regression analysis of Rejection Sensitivity scores on that of RAS scores. The adjusted R square value is equal to 0.172 which suggests that Rejection Sensitivity scores account for 17.2 percent of the variation in RAS scores, at p=0.05.

Results of the qualitative data derived from narrative inquiry have been presented in the next section.

6. DISCUSSION

“Although the nature of love is not easy to define, it has an intrinsic order, an architecture that can be detected, excavated, and explored. Because it is part of the physical universe, love has to be lawful. Like the rest of the world, it is governed and described by principles we can discover but cannot change. If we only knew where and how to look...” (Lewis, Amini & Lannon, 2001).

The present study is an attempt to examine romantic relationships from the vantage point of an exciting new idea called ‘mindset’. A sample of 30 people aged between 18 to 60 years was chosen for the study. Both, qualitative as well quantitative data were collected from the participants.

The first research objective was to study the inter-relationship between Rejection Sensitivity, Relationship satisfaction and the Implicit Theories of Relationships (growth vs. destiny beliefs). In order to see if there is any significant relationship between them, Pearson’s correlation was carried out. The RAS scores were found to be significantly correlated with the growth mindset scores (.397*). The Regression value as shown in Table 2 depicts that the predictor of growth belief scores explains 15.8 percent of variation in the criterion of RAS scores.

These results appear to be in sync with the fact that belief in growth is associated with the generally optimistic evaluation of a relationship's potential (Knee, 1998). A person who has got a growth mindset is likely to believe in oneself, one’s partner as well as the relationship more as compared to a person who has got destiny related beliefs. Destiny belief concerns the stability of one's impressions about romantic relationships and involves believing that relationships are either meant to be or they are not. Growth belief concerns the perceived stability of problems in the relationship and reflects the assumption that relationships can be maintained and problems can be overcome (Knee & Petty, 2013). In her book, Dr. Dweck (2017) talked about the importance of understanding that every person has their own imperfections and flaws. Every relationship encounters problems but a growth mindset never fails to persevere. Such a mindset confronts the distressing situations. In this regard, even relationship experts like Wile (1995) have talked about how disagreements and conflicts between spouses in a romantic relationship are used as building blocks to strengthen and deepen the roots of the relation. A growth-mindset oriented person is aware of the fact that no relationship is problem free and the challenge is to comprehend and acknowledge each

other's shortcomings, and then build from there. People with growth beliefs tend to extend support to their partner instead of judgment. All these virtues and the inherent faith in one's partner's abilities makes one see the relationship in a positive light and be highly satiated with its dynamics even if there are the tests of time. These people do not believe in such statements like 'Flawless is perfect' and are aware that perfection is just a myth. So, these kinds of growth oriented beliefs make one more likely to derive greater satisfaction from one's relationship even when there are obstacles and difficulties.

Then from Table 1, it can be deciphered that there is a negative correlation between scores on RAS and that of Rejection Sensitivity. The scores were found to be significantly correlated (-.415*). This could be explained in the light of a theory that says, 'the desire to achieve acceptance and to avoid rejection is widely acknowledged to be a central human motive' (Maslow, 1987; Rogers, 1959; Sullivan, 1937). RAS is a self report measure that assesses one's level of satisfaction attained from their romantic relationship whereas Rejection Sensitivity scale indicates about the expectations of acceptance/rejection in such situations. Individuals with higher rejection sensitivity typically feel insecure and unhappy about their relationships and tend to perceive ambiguous behaviors in significant others as intentional rejection (Innamorati, Balsamo et al, 2014). So, people who are very receptive towards social rejection tend to be less satisfied from their romantic relationships and also, from their partners. In a study conducted by Downey and Feldman (1996), it has been demonstrated that rejection-sensitive people and their romantic partners are dissatisfied with their relationships. Hence, these two aspects of rejection sensitivity and relationship satisfaction are inversely functional in their dynamics and thus, this explains the significantly negative correlation between them and as much as 17.2 percent of variations in RAS scores could be accounted for by the equation containing one's Rejection Sensitivity scores (Table 2).

The second research objective was to gather narratives on people's journey in relationships and to examine their journey through the lens of their mindset. For this, narrative enquiry was utilized and the respondents were asked to give an account of their journeys in 'love' which were given as visual narratives, poems, life stories etc. In this regard, triangulation of data proved to be an effective measure in order to improve the comprehension of a person's beliefs about his/her partner and the relationship. Triangulation has been viewed as a valuable qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources (Carter et al, 2014). Coming back to the research method, narrative inquiry in psychology is a viable alternative to the positivist paradigm as it leads to greater comprehension of the human psyche as compared to the mechanistic perspective that is there in traditional psychology (Sarbin, 1986). Certainly, the wand of narrative inquiry has been instrumental for gaining valuable insights into the 'love-psyche' of the respondents. Their narratives helped in delving deeper into their rooted beliefs and helped in viewing the old-school idea of love from a novel perspective of mindset. Life stories were particularly very useful in this. A life story is a way to put one's life as a whole; one's entire lived experience into story form, presenting an understanding of a life lived from an insider's perspective (Atkinson, 2007; Van-Manen, 1990). So, the life stories attached even more significance to the quantitative data and the Implicit Theories' scores for the particular participants were scrutinized in the light of these stories.

The narratives have been instrumental in corroborating the groundwork of destiny and growth beliefs in a relationship. This held specifically true for those respondents who have had a break up in the past and are currently, no more in the 'cherished relationship' and have destiny related beliefs towards relationships at the same time. Their narrative data had such statements like "With the right person, you don't have to work hard to be happy", "Out of sight, out of mind" etc. Also, these participants were more reluctant to forgive their partners after fights and disagreements. They still have hard feelings towards the 'argumentative partner' and they are unwilling to forgive them. This line of thinking is supported by findings in studies on people who have strong belief in the idea of soul mates. Burnette and Franiuk (2009) found that strong soul mate theorists evaluate how close the current partner matches his or her ideal and base subsequent decisions about forgiveness on these evaluations. Furthermore, in the present study those respondents who had a significantly high growth belief score produced such narratives which backed up their mindset. For instance, one of them said, "Even after numerous fights and conflicts, even when we were almost at the verge of breaking up, we still bounced back each time. Every argument, every misunderstanding has actually strengthened our relationship and I know that we'll always have each other's back, come what may!"

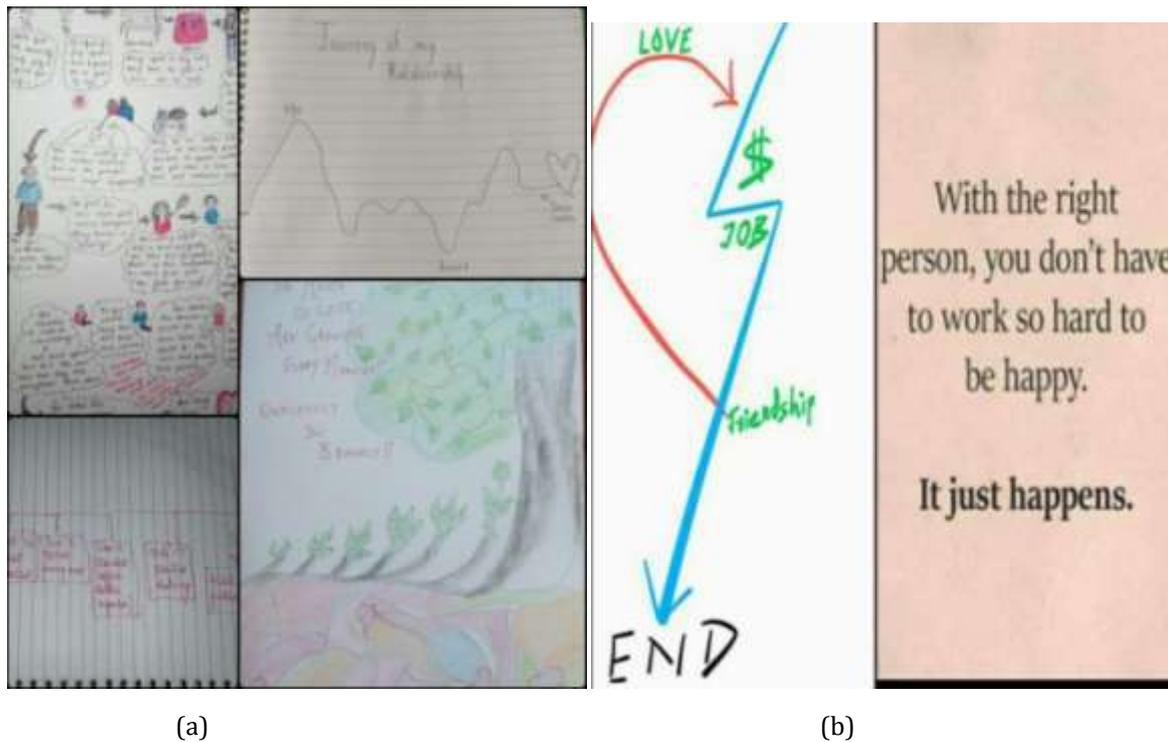


Figure 1: Participants' visual narratives reflecting (a) "Growth Mindset" and (b) "Fixed Mindset" beliefs

All in all, it can be said that the present study has opened up new avenues for the exploration of the effects of a particular mindset on varying and vivid experiences of love. Several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, those people who are more receptive or sensitive towards rejection tend to derive less satisfaction from their relationships. Then, having growth related beliefs leading ultimately to a growth mindset goes a long way in determining our relationship satisfaction. The kind of love and related lived experiences may vary among individuals but their perceptions converge with their mindset, to a great extent. The study has its limitations in having a small sample size. Further research can gather more data with a bigger sample for a more comprehensive and better picture of people's differing perceptions towards love and romantic relationships. Also, the quantitative data were collected mainly through self report measures which have a major disadvantage of social desirability. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates how diverse methodologies and concepts can be utilized to further our understanding of love. Future research endeavors can engage in more thorough and in-depth studies on a bigger scale to further refine the influence of mindset on love.

"People who do not intuit or respect the laws of acceleration and momentum break bones; those who do not grasp the principles of love waste their lives and break their hearts. The evidence of that pain surrounds us, in the form of failed marriages, hurtful relationships, neglected children, unfulfilled ambitions, and thwarted dreams" (Lewis, Amini & Lannon, 2001). The more we understand the principles of love, the more we can do to alleviate such pain.

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International Journal of Innovative Studies in Sociology and Humanities (IJISSH)

ISSN 2456-4931 (Online)

www.ijissh.org

Volume: 4 Issue: 2 | February 2019

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