

The Diversity of Love Journal

Sexual Imprinting of Attraction and Love

Article published on [January 29, 2022](#) by [Victor Karandashev](#)

Retrieved from: <https://love-diversity.org/sexual-imprinting-of-love/>

The mechanism of imprinting plays an important role in shaping our sexual attraction and love preferences. I explain [what “imprinting” is elsewhere](#).

Early works by Konrad Lorenz (Lorenz, 1935) demonstrated that the early experiences of birds and animals could affect their mating preferences. *Sexual imprinting* can play an important role in adult life.

Positive Sexual Imprinting in Childhood

Our early childhood attachments to an opposite-sex parent or peer have a significant impact on the type of person we will perceive as attractive to us in adult life. Due to imprinting, early experience with kin boosts sexual attraction when a person is unaware of the incest taboo.

However, such an experience reduces sexual attraction when the person is aware of the culturally imposed taboo (Fraley & Marks, 2010).

Imprinting of Love in Adolescence

Researchers and practitioners believe that adolescence is a particularly sensitive period when “imprinting” shapes our romantic preferences. In

this regard, first love plays a strikingly memorable role. Across many cultures, this period—between the ages of 13 and 14—provides adolescents with the first and most substantial time that determines the qualities and types of subsequent romantic attachments.

According to the *imprinting theory*, adolescence is a *sensitive period for romantic relationships*, and experiences during this period can be imprinted for life (Brain, 2010; Braams, 2013).

Negative Sexual Imprinting

In other cases, *negative imprinting* may have the opposite effect. A child may develop a sexual aversion to the phenotype of a person with whom the child spent a significant amount of time in infancy and childhood.

This way, *imprinting* leads to sexual aversion rather than sexual attraction. Those with whom animals or human individuals spent their early years in childhood can be sexually unattractive to them. They are negatively imprinted (see for review, Lampert 1997, p.15).

Here are two case studies from Israel and Taiwan from earlier times that present examples of such negative imprinting.

Two Case Studies of Negative Sexual Imprinting

In the old Taiwanese culture, the parents of a boy often adopted a baby girl from another family for matchmaking in the future. This way, the parents of the girl saved on her upbringing costs, whereas the parents of the boy saved on the high bride price.

Thus, the girl and boy grew up together as siblings. It turned out that when parents expected their children's marriage in early adulthood, the boy and girl were not sexually attracted to each other and preferred to avoid this kind of relationship. When they chose to be obedient and

agreed to marry, they did not enjoy their marital life. And their sexual life was unpleasant (Wolf, 1995).

Traditionally, children in Israeli kibbutz communities spent a significant amount of time in communal houses for children. Due to this, they spent far more time with their peers than with their families.

These boys and girls, who grew up together in early childhood, were often not attracted to their peers when it came to mating. And they usually did not marry each other (Shepher, 1971, 1983).

The Effect of Positive and Negative Imprinting Is Not Simple and Not Always Consistent

These two practices from the past illustrate how negative imprinting can affect sexual attraction. Besides such case studies, however, the systematic review of publications has shown that the effects of positive and negative imprinting on human mate preferences and sexual attraction can vary.

In humans, researchers found little evidence in support of positive imprinting, whereas natural observations provided support for the effect of negative sexual imprinting. Men and women are not sexually attracted and prefer to avoid mating with those with whom they were close in infancy and early childhood. However, such experiences do not cause strong aversions. Such experience also does not completely suppress or exclude sexual desire.

In the studies of humans, relatively weak evidence was generally found for both positive and negative imprinting. Men and women are less likely to fall in love with those with whom they were close in infancy and early childhood. Nevertheless, they do not experience strong

aversiveness toward them and can feel sexual desire (Rantala & Marcinkowska, 2011).

Thus, imprinting can have a significant impact on our attractions or aversions in love. Nevertheless, the effects of *imprinting* do not shape our “destiny” in love. We still have some relative leeway in terms of who we love.

Among the Other Topics of Interest in this Regard Are:

- **Genetic Secrets of Love Attraction**
- **Genetic Diversity and Genetic Sexual Attraction**
- **Why Do We Love Good-Looking People?**
- **Sexual Preferences for Physical Attractiveness**
- **Physical Beauty of Men and Women Across Cultures**
- **Attraction to Familiar Others**

References

Bateson, P. (1978). Sexual imprinting and optimal outbreeding. *Nature*, 273(5664), 659-660.

Berezkei, T., Gyuris, P., Koves, P., & Bernath, L. (2002). Homogamy, genetic similarity, and imprinting; parental influence on mate choice preferences. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 33, 677-690.

Berezkei, T., Gyuris, P., & Weisfeld, G. E. (2004). Sexual imprinting in human mate choice. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B*, 271, 1129-1134.

- Brain, A. (2010). Attraction: First Love – The Imprint. Blog of Ageless Brain.
- Braams, B. (2013). Adolescents in love: What makes a first love special? Leidenpsychologyblog. Leiden University.
- Fraley, R. C., & Marks, M. J. (2010). Westermarck, Freud, and the incest taboo: Does familial resemblance activate sexual attraction?. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36(9), 1202-1212.
- Immelmann, K. (1969). über den Einfluß frühkindlicher Erfahrungen auf die geschlechtliche Objektfixierung bei Estrildiden 1. *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie*, 26(6), 677-691.
- Immelmann, K. (1972). Sexual and other long-term aspects of imprinting in birds and other species. *Advances in the Study of Behavior*, 4, 147-174
- Lampert, A. (1997). *The evolution of love*. Praeger.
- Lorenz, K. (1935). Der kumpan in der umwelt des vogels. *Journal für Ornithologie*, 83(2), 137-213.
- Moltz, H. (1960). Imprinting: Empirical basis and theoretical significance. *Psychological Bulletin*, 57(4), 291–314. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0041214>
- Rantala, M. J., & Marcinkowska, U. M. (2011). The role of sexual imprinting and the Westermarck effect in mate choice in humans. *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, 65(5), 859-873.
- Schutz, F. (1965). Sexuelle Prägung bei Anatiden 2, 3. *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie*, 22(1), 50-103.
- Shepher, J. (1971). Mate selection among second generation kibbutz adolescents and adults: Incest avoidance and negative imprinting.

Archives of Sexual Behavior, 1, 293-307.

Shepher, J. (1983) *Incest: A biosocial view*. New York, NY: Academic Press

Ten Cate, C., & Vos, D. R. (1999). Sexual imprinting and evolutionary processes. *Advances in the Study of Behavior, 28, 1-31.*

Vicedo, M. (2013). *The nature and nurture of love*. University of Chicago Press.

Wolf, A. P. (1995). *Sexual attraction and childhood association: A Chinese brief for Edward Westermarck*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

See other articles on related topics in the rubrics of **attachment in love**, **imprinting**, **love attraction**, **sexual attractiveness**.