

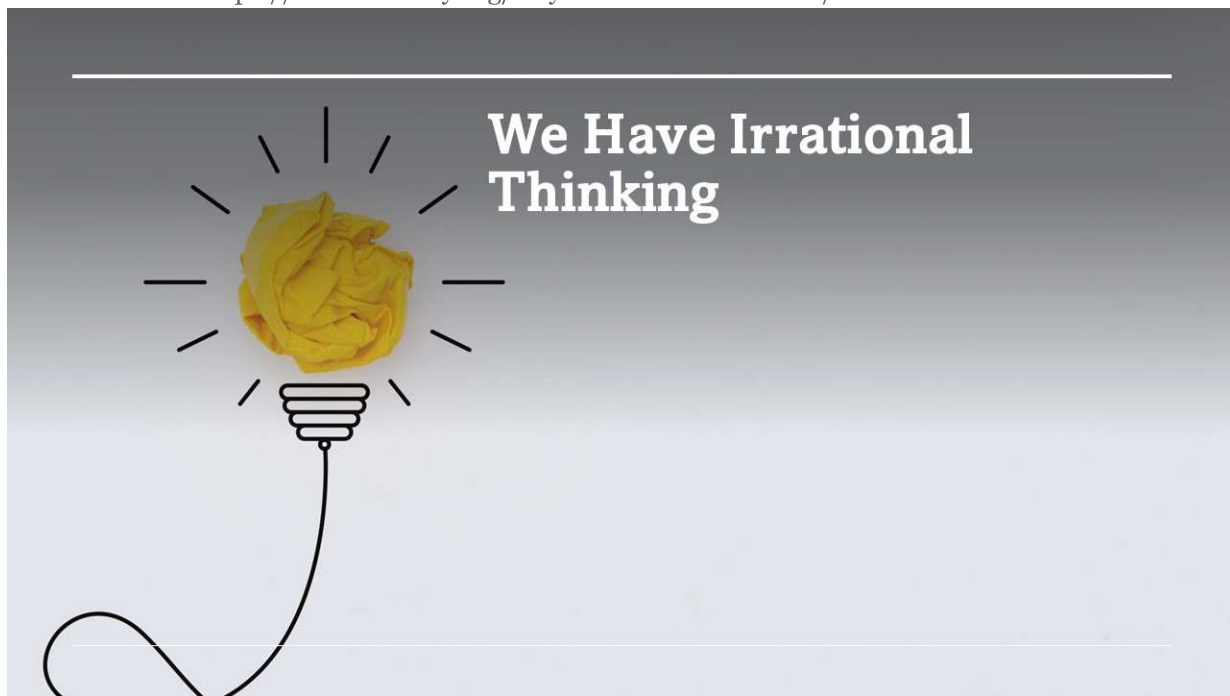
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How Love Makes Us Irrational: Cognitive Biases of Intuition and Magic

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For many people, romantic love appears to be an enchanting and mysterious emotional experience. It seems to be something irrational and inexplicable. People are curious about the secrets of love, yet not many scholars dare to rationally explain or scientifically understand why we fall in love. Do we follow our irrational thinking when we are in love?

Our Irrational Human Nature

Through centuries and across cultures, people have been inclined to think irrationally and intuitively about many things. Little knowledge and a lack of rational thinking were the main reasons why they thought this way. Historical perspectives reveal that before modern empirical frameworks emerged, early human societies relied heavily on mythic and animistic explanations to make sense of emotional surges and interpersonal fate.

Even though science has helped us understand the world and life more rationally, people still tend to think irrationally and rely on their gut feelings. Contemporary psychological research demonstrates that people's cognition remains deeply anchored in evolutionary heuristics. While formal logic and empirical reasoning allow individuals to navigate complex scientific, technical, and mathematical landscapes, the subjective experience of romantic attraction routinely circumvents these higher-order analytical systems, returning the mind to primal, intuitive processing.

The Power of Irrational Thinking

This is why many people believe in some secret supernatural powers, in “conspiracy theories”, astrology, horoscopes, amulets, talismans, charms, interpretations of dreams, and many other mystical and magical things. No rational explanation can change their beliefs. These beliefs are persistent, despite anything.

Concerning this point, Howard Rankin asserts,

“Human beings are not logical; we are storytellers most interested in emotional comfort and safety. We can convince ourselves and justify anything. “

([RANKIN, 2019](#)).

As he claims,

“We are basically still Neanderthal, focused on survival and safety, and living in the present. Our brains haven’t adapted to a much more complex world.”

([RANKIN, 2019](#)).

Cognitive psychology reinforces this view through the concept of belief perseverance and confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). When a narrative provides emotional security, psychological comfort, or a sense of personal significance, the human brain actively privileges supportive evidence while dismissing contradictory empirical data. In the realm of interpersonal attraction and love, this tendency turns subjective feelings into perceived absolute truths.

Why People in Love Think Irrationally

In the same way, people believe in the irrational nature of romantic love and relational compatibility. They tend to trust their intuition rather than rational arguments. Many believe in fate and destiny in love, in the mythic “chemistry of love,” and in love at first sight. They believe that relationships work or do not work for them because they do not have the right “chemistry”. They tend to be intuitive and irrational in their relationships.

Many people believe that the mysteries of romantic love are beyond our rational knowledge, reason, and logic. Their ideas of love relationships concede some irrationality. People in traditional cultures who were not as well educated called this “the magic of love.” People who are better educated today call it “love’s chemistry.” Yet, love chemistry is still hard for us to understand from a scientific point of view. The term seems scholarly and respectable at first, although it is still irrational in its subject.

In their scholarly approach to love, modern scientific conceptions of love strive to be rational, reasonable, and scientifically based. Nowadays, references to the stars aligning for a couple or fate sound pseudoscientific. The Amour’s, or

Cupid's, arrow in a heart is a beautiful symbol, but the myth seems too naïve to believe for modern people.

Nevertheless, many of them continue to believe in love irrationally. Why is that?

The Neurobiology Behind Love's Irrationality

Modern neurobiology offers important insights into this persistence. When an individual experiences intense romantic attraction, subcortical brain structures initiate a powerful neurochemical cascade (Fisher et al., 2005). Dopaminergic pathways associated with reward processing and motivation flood the brain, creating an intense, focused euphoria (Aron et al., 2005). Simultaneously, neuroimaging studies show a marked reduction in activity within the prefrontal cortex—the area responsible for critical judgment, risk assessment, and negative evaluation (Bartels & Zeki, 2004). Thus, the subjective experience of “irrational chemistry” has an exact neurological signature: an activated reward center paired with a temporary deactivation of critical scrutiny.

Domain-Specific Cognition: Compartmentalizing Logic and Love

First, human reasoning is not a uniform engine applied equally across all life contexts. People frequently maintain a cognitive dichotomy: they apply rigorous, objective logic in professional, scientific, or business domains, yet actively embrace subjective, belief-driven thinking when navigating their internal experiences and personal relationships. An individual can operate as an analytical researcher in the laboratory while simultaneously acting as an intuitive, feeling-centered partner at home. For many, these distinct perspectives co-exist without perceived contradiction.

This phenomenon reflects cognitive compartmentalization. Psychological research on domain-specific cognition demonstrates that emotional contexts activate specialized cognitive modes tailored to fulfill human needs (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). In intimate relationships, these specialized modes prioritize preserving social bonds, emotional connection, and internal narrative coherence over cold, objective accuracy.

Dual-Process Architecture: The Speed of Intuitive Impressions

Second, beyond context-dependent compartmentalization, human cognition relies on two distinct modes of processing: analytical reasoning and rapid intuition. While deliberate analysis works well when evaluating abstract data or external objects, assessing other human beings brings automatic, sub-conscious mechanisms to the forefront.

Dual-process theories of cognition, such as Daniel Kahneman's framework distinguishing System 1 (fast, automatic, intuitive) from System 2 (slow, deliberate, analytical), illuminate this underlying mechanism (Kahneman, 2011). In romantic contexts and interpersonal attraction, System 1 operates instantaneously—evaluating non-verbal cues, facial symmetry, micro-expressions, and vocal pitch within milliseconds (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Because System 1 triggers immediate affective responses long before System 2 can construct an analytical assessment, individuals routinely mistake these rapid, pre-reflective reactions for deep, objective insights into a partner's character.

Furthermore, in interpersonal perception, this reliance on System 1 fosters significant cognitive distortions:

- **The Halo Effect:** A cognitive bias where an observer's positive impression of one prominent trait (e.g., physical attractiveness)

irrationally colors their overall judgment of a person's character, intelligence, and moral integrity (Dion et al., 1972).

- **Positive Illusions and Cognitive Idealization:** Romantic partners routinely view each other through idealized lenses—overestimating their partner's virtues while minimizing or reinterpreting obvious flaws (Murray et al., 1996).

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The Pitfalls of Exhaustive Thinking

Third, critical thinking requires substantial metabolic and mental effort. Hard, extensive deliberation is exhausting, leading many individuals to favor simple cognitive shortcuts over rigorous analysis—even if those shortcuts yield biased conclusions. Interpersonal relationships and self-perceptions are particularly vulnerable to these cognitive shortcuts.

In social cognition, this principle is known as *cognitive miserliness*—the inherent tendency of the human brain to seek energy-efficient solutions and avoid metabolic expenditure on complex deliberation whenever possible (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Rigorously analyzing a potential partner's long-term compatibility, psychological stability, value alignment, and behavioral history demands intense cognitive effort. In contrast, surrendering to intuitive concepts such as “we were meant to be” or “it was fate” provides an immediate, low-effort cognitive resolution.

While these heuristic shortcuts reduce mental fatigue, they introduce profound systematic biases into relationship decision-making:

- **The Choice Paradox and Decision Fatigue:** In contemporary dating environments, exhaustive analytical evaluation of numerous potential partners leads to cognitive overload and dissatisfaction

(Schwartz, 2004). Intuitive, “gut-feeling” heuristics serve as a necessary defense mechanism against choice overload.

- **Retrospective Narrative Reconstruction:** Once a relationship is established, partners routinely reconstruct their shared history—viewing random initial encounters as inevitable, destined events. This cognitive bias smooths over initial doubts and simplifies complex relationship histories into a cohesive narrative of fate (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Zsok et al., 2017).

The Pitfalls of Thrilling Emotions

Fourth, people tend to like everything that is mysterious, surprising, wonderful, beautiful, and fascinating. Love is such a “thing” that excites men and women, young and old. They like the thrill of such knowledge. It is natural that they like things, experiences, and events that are intriguing, captivating, and charming.

Human neurobiology is exquisitely tuned to novelty, anticipation, and uncertainty. Behavioral neuroscience demonstrates that dopamine release peaks not merely when receiving a reward, but during the *anticipation* of an uncertain reward (Sapolsky, 2017). The mystery inherent in romantic attraction—the unpredictable back-and-forth of early courtship, the ambiguity of a partner’s feelings, and the sudden thrill of discovery—functions as a powerful neurochemical catalyst. Deconstructing romantic attraction into dry sociological compatibility tables or biological evolutionary algorithms strips away the thrilling narrative uncertainty that the human reward system finds so intensely satisfying.

Idealistic Thinking Makes Men and Women Happy

Across various cultures, folklore, art, literature, and cinema have long depicted romantic love in fascinating, exciting, and deeply inspiring ways. Often, these depictions are beautifully and unabashedly idealistic—functioning for adults much like fairy tales do for children. People engage with romantic stories because they spark hope and allow them to believe, if only for a moment, that their dreams can come true.

Irrational, idealistic thinking is thrilling. Why, then, succumb entirely to cold, realistic analysis? It is often far more meaningful—and emotionally fulfilling—to embrace idealism when thinking about love and human connection.

Crucially, cross-cultural relationship research suggests that this romantic idealism is not merely an entertaining distraction, but an adaptive psychological mechanism. Cultural frameworks dictate how these idealizations are structured—whether framed through individualistic notions of romantic destiny (“finding one’s soulmate”) or collectivistic models of relational harmony and dedicated devotion (Karandashev, 2019, 2021).

Empirical studies in relationship science reveal that couples who maintain moderate levels of romantic idealization and “positive illusions” report higher relationship satisfaction, lower rates of conflict, and greater long-term longevity (Murray et al., 1996; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). By irrationally elevating a partner’s virtues and viewing a relationship as uniquely special or pre-ordained, individuals construct a psychological buffer against the inevitable frictions, stresses, and routine hardships of shared life.

In this light, romantic irrationality reveals its ultimate paradox: while scientifically unjustified as an objective description of reality, thinking irrationally when we are in love may be one of the most functionally rational strategies the human mind has developed to build, protect, and sustain enduring connection.

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