Changing the conversation around love languages and positive relationships

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Even if you don't know your love language, you've probably heard of the concept. The theory's pervasiveness in pop culture has only increased in the 30-odd years since Baptist pastor Gary Chapman published his book

"The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts."

Yet psychology researchers at the University of Toronto Mississauga recently showed that Chapman's main assumptions don't stand up to scientific study—and have proposed a new metaphor for sustaining positive relationships.

"We were very skeptical about the love languages idea, so we decided to review the existing studies on it," says Emily Impett, a professor in the UTM department of psychology who collaborated with UTM graduate student Gideon Park and York University Assistant Professor Amy Muise. "None of the 10 studies supported Chapman's claims." Their findings will soon be published in the journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

Chapman uses the language metaphor to represent how individuals tend to prefer giving and receiving love. The notion rests on three premises: that every person has a primary love language, that there are five love languages (physical touch, words of affirmation, acts of service, quality time and gifts), and that when couples "speak" the same love language it improves the quality of their relationships.

Each of these assertions broke down when Impett and her team evaluated them based on the studies' findings.

"People determine their primary love language by taking Chapman's quiz, which forces them to select the expressions of love they find most meaningful," says Impett, who is also the director of the Relationships and Well-Being Laboratory at UTM. "It could be choosing between receiving gifts or holding hands, for example. These are trade-offs we don't have to make in real life. In fact, people report that they find all of the things described by the love languages to be incredibly important in a relationship."

When it comes to the number of love languages, the studies found inconsistent evidence for the five languages Chapman identifies, while other relationship research shows there are additional ways of expressing and receiving love. "One key thing to remember is that Chapman developed the five love languages by working with a sample of white, religious, mixed-gender, traditional couples," says Impett. "There are certain things that are left out, such as affirming a partner's personal goals outside of the relationship, which might be significant to couples with more egalitarian values."

Most importantly, Impett and her team found no scientific evidence for Chapman's central contention that people who choose partners that speak their love language, or learn to speak it, will have more successful relationships. "There's no support for this matching effect," says Impett. "People are basically happier in relationships when they receive any of these expressions of love."

Still, she and her collaborators recognize that people crave easy tools that promise to enhance their love lives. Chapman's book has sold more than 20 million copies, more than 30 million people have taken the online quiz and the hashtag #lovelanguages has 500 million views. "Everyone wants to be in a good relationship, so we didn't just say the love languages are scientifically debunked and stop there," says Impett. "We offered an alternative metaphor that's rooted in the research."

Their new metaphor suggests that relationships are like a balanced diet, where people need a full range of essential nutrients (including the factors described by the five love languages and others, such as companionship and emotional support) to nourish lasting love. "It keeps all expressions of love on the menu and invites partners to share what they need at different times," says Impett. "It allows for the fact that people and relationships aren't static and can't be categorized into neat boxes."

This is not the first time Impett has put common beliefs about relationships to the test. "I really like challenging these lay ideas, because my goal is always to translate the best [scientific evidence](link) to therapists and the general public," she says.

More information: Impett, E. A., et al, Popular psychology through a scientific lens: Evaluating love languages from a relationship science perspective, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (2023). In press.

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