Medical Xpress

Is there a science to romantic love?

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Ximena Arriaga, professor of psychological sciences at Purdue University, has known and admired Phillip Shaver for years. They are colleagues in the field of studying romantic relationships, a relatively new field. So she was thrilled to accept an invitation to an event this week where Shaver, distinguished professor emeritus of psychology at University of California, Davis, would receive the Society for Personality and Social Psychology's "Legacy" award.

But she soon realized she could not congratulate him in person. Her goddaughter is getting married the same weekend. "It would be too ironic to miss her big event in order to celebrate the flourishing of attachment theory," she said in a personal note to Shaver.

She is sad to miss the conference and award ceremony, just the same, she said. "The study of relationships would have been so vastly different had you not written the early seminal papers," she continued in her note. "Science is stronger from your contributions, but the ripple effects extend widely ... and have defined so much of what we know about human behavior and what matters most in life."

The award Shaver will receive in Portland, Oregon, honors "luminary figures" in social and personality psychology, tracing their impact to contemporary work.

Began with romantic love

For Shaver, it started with a study he co-authored in 1987 on romantic

love that would transform the study of interpersonal relations. He came to teach at UC Davis in 1992, and has since served as department chair twice. During his tenure as chair, the department grew its faculty in social and personality psychology, as well as in the emerging area of cognitive neuroscience.

George R. (Ron) Mangun, a neuroscientist who also arrived on campus in 1992, said: "Phil was the person who shepherded the department into the modern era across the board, and helped put us on a track to a top-ranked department.

"He was a principal player in the mind sciences initiative that led to the Center for Mind and Brain, and also supported the development of the Center for Neuroscience as the chair who understood its significance and opportunity for the department," added Mangun, who has served as department chair and as dean of the Division of Social Sciences in the College of Letters and Science, and was founding director of the UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain.

Expanded knowledge of human bonding

Attachment theory, as Shaver's field of study is called by academics, actually began with psychological studies in the 1960s and '70s of patterns of infant-mother attachment. His 1987 paper with co-author Cindy Hazen then identified the same patterns in adult relationships.

Those findings "spawned an enormous interdisciplinary and international research literature," according to the website for the Feb. 9 Legacy Symposium: "Over the past 30 years, hundreds of studies have been published covering attachment processes in the brain, the personality, romantic and marital relationships, religious experiences, and large organizations."

Hazen, now a professor at Cornell University, will be among the symposium speakers. She was a graduate student and Shaver was a professor at the University of Denver when their article, "Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process," appeared in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Since the award was announced several months ago, Shaver has been receiving notes from colleagues at Rice, Baylor, and other universities thanking and praising him for his legacy.

Guests at the legacy luncheon honoring him will include his wife, Gail Goodman, a distinguished professor of psychology at UC Davis, as well as former students and other researchers from around the world who study adult relationships.

The National Science Foundation, National Institute of Mental Health, and numerous foundations have funded his work. He has written more than 300 scholarly articles and book chapters, and co-authored and co-edited numerous books.

"It's both gratifying and a little embarrassing," Shaver said in an interview about his latest award. "I'm as much a legacy of these other creative people as they are of me; we have all worked hard for many years to build this field, sometimes collaborating directly and sometimes influencing each other from a distance.

"At age 74, I'm happy to sit back and cheer all the young researchers who are extending the legacy."

Animal bonding

One of the faculty extending that tradition in the UC Davis Department of Psychology is Professor Karen L. Bales, who researches pair bonding

not in humans, but animals—specifically, prairie voles and titi monkeys—in an effort to understand human relationships better.

Bales, whose education is in biology and anthropology, was recruited by UC Davis after serving as a postdoctoral researcher at University of Illinois, Chicago. As it happened, her advisor there, who studied prairie vole bonding, was good friends with Shaver. "So while Phil looks at adult relationships in humans, I look at adult relationships in animals," said Bales, who came to UC Davis in 2004. Both titi monkeys and prairie voles form monogamous pair bonds, she explained, and are good subjects for study through observation and brain scans, in particular. She and her lab researchers look at how each pair form a bond, their pair bonding behavior (both long-term and short-term), parenting and other factors.

Attraction and relationships

Paul Eastwick, associate professor in psychology, continues part of the legacy at UC Davis as well. He joined the UC Davis psychology department faculty in 2016, where he leads studies in attraction and relationships. He said he knew about Shaver, and UC Davis' reputation in psychology, while he was still in grad school.

One of Eastwick's research programs examines how the qualities that people say are critically important to them in a romantic partner—their ideal partner preferences—direct romantic partner selection and retention. He is also interested in exploring how close relationships grow and develop over time. He has published research, as well, on why people's current and former romantic partners sometimes share traits and sometimes do not.

Eastwick's study published last spring looked at the differences between short-term and long-term relationships. He said Shaver's influence was a

huge factor in his decision to join the faculty at UC Davis.

"He is a legend for his contributions to the field."

Provided by UC Davis