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Proxmire's Golden Fleece Award

In the Spring of 1975, I and two of my University of Wisconsin colleagues, Mary Utne O'Brien and Jane Traupmann Pillemer, had embarked on a program to learn more about the nature of passionate love and sexual desire. The National Science Foundation had awarded us a tiny grant, allowing us to investigate the importance of social justice and equity in romantic exchanges. Our early results were promising. We'd found considerable evidence that in love relationships, equity mattered.

Specifically, we'd found that:

- 1: The more socially desirable people are (the more attractive, personable, famous, rich, or considerate they are), the more socially desirable they will expect a mate to be.
2. Dating couples are more likely to fall in love if they perceive their relationships to be equitable.
3. Couples are likely to end up with someone fairly close to themselves in social desirability. They are also likely to be matched on the basis of self-esteem, looks, intelligence, education, mental and physical health (or disability).
4. Couples who perceive their relationships to be equitable are more likely to get involved, sexually.
5. Equitable relationships are comfortable relationships.
6. Equitable relationships are stable relationships.

When Wisconsin's U.S. Senator William Proxmire discovered what we were up to, he awarded us a "Golden Fleece Award," claiming we were "fleecing" taxpayers with our "unneeded" and "frivolous" scientific research. The Senator had launched his well-publicized campaign against a bevy of love and sex researchers by firing off the first in a series of serio-comic press releases:

I object to this not only because no one—not even the National Science Foundation—can argue that falling in love is a science; not only because I'm sure that even if they spend \$84 million or \$84 billion they wouldn't get an answer that anyone would believe. *I'm also against it because I don't want the answer.*

I believe that 200 million other Americans want to leave some things in life a mystery, and right on top of the things we don't want to know is why a man falls in love with a woman and vice versa

So National Science Foundation—get out of the love racket. Leave that to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Irving Berlin. Here if anywhere Alexander Pope was right when he observed, "If ignorance is bliss, tis folly to be wise." (cited in Hatfield & Walster, 1978, p. viii).

In terms that will sound all too familiar to today's IARR members, the Senator urged the United States Senate to seize control over the NSF's and NIMH's scientific granting and peer review process.

In subsequent weeks, Senator Proxmire and his political allies issued a whirlwind of press releases. Alas for love and sex researchers, he and his scriptwriters possessed a diabolical and withering sense of humor. (Today's conservative critics and "no-nothings" tend to be a bit dour, and more sinister and more effective than was Proxmire, I'm afraid.) Here is a mocking "Letter to the Editor" that appeared in *The Washington Post* a few hours after Senator Proxmire's original sneak attack.

President Pierce-Martin Condemns NSF Grant

To Study Sex Life of Polish Frogs

Today Peter Croft Pierce-Martin, President of the Acme Wire and Spring Corporation in Dallas, Texas, and his seventy-two employees sent the President and the National Science Foundation an open letter. "We at Acme Wire and Spring object to our hard earned tax dollars being squandered on studies of the sex lives of Polish frogs, why kids fall off tricycles, and such."

President Pierce-Martin pointed out that last year the Acme Corporation and its employees paid \$2.82 million in taxes. He then went on to list NSF and NIMH grants, totaling exactly that amount. Among the projects listed were:

- \$375,000 for a Pentagon study of the Frisbee
- \$84,000 for a study of cross-cultural love
- \$70,000 to study the smell of perspiration given off by Australian aborigines

- \$5,000 to the author of the one one-word poem—"Light"
- \$20,000 to study the blood groups of Polish Zlotnika pigs
- \$5,000 for an analysis of violin varnish

Since this witty "Letter to the Editor" appeared only a few hours after the Senator's original press release, I couldn't help but wonder just how spontaneous President Pierce-Martin's *cri de cœur* was. How did Acme suck up all those figures in an hour and a half? Still, I and all my colleagues had to admit the letter was funny.

A few days after President Pierce-Martin's letter hit the wire services, NSF proffered its earnest rejoinder. The *Washington Post* buried it on one of the inside pages. The NSF rebuttal informed readers—who probably didn't care in the first place—that the \$375,000 "Frisbee" study was actually a Pentagon project designed to develop a new aircraft-launched naval flare, the \$2,000 study of "why children fall off of tricycles" was a Federal FDA project to test the safety of children's toys, and the \$80,000 "down the toilet" program was actually part of the NASA Space program. A compelling rebuttal but, of course, nothing can kill a good joke.

Proxmire's attacks generated so much public attention that before Proxmire's siege ended, 13 scientists exploring the mysteries of love and sex had been attacked for their "scientific boondoggles" and "con games"—including such luminaries as Ellen Berscheid, Robert Baron, and Zick Rubin.

Amazingly, in that dangerous political climate, many distinguished citizens came to our support. Senator Barry Goldwater, three University of

Chicago Nobel Prize Winners, and the Editor of *Science* wrote laudatory letters to the *New York Times*, the *Capital Times*, and *Science* magazine. So did columnist James Reston. In his column in *The New York Times*, Reston wryly agreed that love will always be a mystery.

But if the sociologists and psychologists can get even a suggestion of the answer to our pattern of romantic love, marriage, disillusion, divorce—and the children left behind—it would be the best investment of federal money since Jefferson made the Louisiana purchase.

The University of Wisconsin Madison Faculty Senate met, debated the Senator's charges, and voted to condemn the Senator's "unjust and misleading attacks" by a vote of 84 to 1.

Alas, not all our early relationship research garnered the public's unwavering support.

A friend, Dr. Roland W. Radloff (Program Director of the Social Psychology Program, of the National Science Foundation) suggested I refrain from submitting any grants to NSF for a while. "Let it blow over," he advised. Research on this topic had become too hot to handle. I agreed. (And indeed, since then all my research has been privately funded.)

My mother's Roman Catholic Bishop got into the act. Right Reverend Richard S. Emrich issued a message to the Detroit parishes denouncing the NSF for supporting scientists' attempts to unravel the "most sacred mysteries of love and life." "Who granted these 'scientists' the ability to see into men's minds and

hearts?” he asked. Were our findings going to eliminate pride, selfishness, jealousy, suffering, and war?

Jesus Christ has taught us all that we need to know about love and life. . . . His Word waits there, in *The Holy Bible*, for us. He has been waiting for us for almost 2,000 years. It is *His* commands we must follow, not the childish “advice” of some arrogant, secular scientist, who presumes to know more than Our Lord.

A Chicago tabloid—*The Chicago Daily News*—ran a contest. Readers could call in and vote: “Who is right—Proxmire or Hatfield?” A massive number of readers (and even a few friends) wrote in to say I was “naive” to think love and sex could be studied scientifically. I lost the contest: Proxmire 87.5%, me 12.5%. [Editor: See possible cartoon here: #19.]

This silliness went on for many years. The news stories began to swirl around like some kind of toxic cosmic dust. Senator Proxmire would return to Madison on a Sunday (to attend a Badgers’ football game); he’d take that opportunity to appear on a local TV show denouncing (sigh!) love research. I would be asked to reply. On Monday, one of Senator Proxmire’s comic writers would issue a devastatingly funny press release (inaccurate but beguiling) about the inanities of our love and sex research. By Tuesday morning, I’d be reeling from its aftershock. On Wednesday, the fallout would be settling in near Tokyo. Stories would appear in the *Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*. A few weeks later, *The Bangladeshi Standard’s* Geiger counters would be clicking out the news. Each time an editor in Japan, Bangladesh, or Mozambique translated the story, a name

would get misspelled here, a word altered there, and the next thing you know, the Wisconsin *State Journal* would have picked up the challenge or comic riff yet again. The news story would be so altered and so sensationalized—by now, Dr. Hatfield, the mad doctor of love, would be caught slipping women dime bags of marijuana, asking students to confess their darkest secrets while both were doing God-knows-what in their bedrooms—that the *Journal* would assume that somehow they'd missed a heck of a story. Then once more the dust would start swirling around the earth, entering newer and higher orbits with each new news cycle.

I got to know the postman very well indeed as he dragged in mail by the bag full. I saved the best of those letters, and recently, when I decided to write a comic novel about *Rosie*, a young sexuality researcher who gets in trouble for *her* research, I had those Proxmire newscasts, comic attacks, and letters to draw on. Rosie's adventures are pure fantasy—except for the amazing letters I received. I could not construct missives more stunning. Crazy persons' letters, with blood curdling threats. Spiky letters, painstakingly, tremblingly constructed. Letters written in Day-Glo colors. Words marching in an orderly way across the top of the page, down the sides, and along the bottom, but then they began to sprawl in upon themselves, growing smaller and smaller as they whirled around the page. At the vortex, the microscopic calligraphy ended in a sinister inkblot. Letters filled with pain and suffering. Most people, of course, wanted to know how they could scam some of the U. S. Government's "loot" for themselves. When they discovered they would have to dash off a grant—and actually get that grant reviewed—they were irate.

Scientists were not without their own John Stewart's, and their own biting humor, of course. Art Buchwald (the Molly Ivens of his day) and a host of lesser known commentators caricatured Senator Proxmire's "paroxysms," and "love spats" with relationship researchers. [Editors note: I've attached a cartoon. See #17.] Researchers such as Ronald Hutchinson began to sue Senator Proxmire for his distortions—and won!

How did I cope? Not very well, I'm afraid. I am a shy person, not on the lookout for conflict; I just like to pursue my intellectual interests. So *L'Affaire Proxmire* was actually painful to me. When I remember those days, I do so mostly with embarrassment, despite the eventual positive and rewarding outcome.

Thank God for longevity! I have hung around long enough to see things change for the better. When Ellen Berscheid and I wrote *Interpersonal Attraction* (in 1969), we were able to ferret out precious little research on passionate love and sexual desire. It was pathetic. We had to speculate about the nature of love with little or no data (and shockingly little experience of our own) to guide us.

What a change has occurred in 30+ years! There are historical periods when scientific and technological advances allow scientists to take giant strides forward. This is certainly one of those times. In spite of the fact that since George Bush has taken over and it sometimes feels as if the Taliban is controlling American science policy, we still live in a time of amazing scientific ferment. Today, scholars from a variety of theoretical disciplines— social psychologists, anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, microbiologists, neuroendocrinologists, and more—are addressing the same issues with which we struggled. They are employing an impressive array

of new techniques as well: they are studying primates in the wild and in captivity and pouring over fMRIs. Historians are now studying history from the “bottom up” rather than the “top down.” They are examining less the lives of kings and queens and more those of the majority of our deceased sisters and brothers, utilizing demographic data (marriage, birth, death, and divorce records) architectural and archaeological remains, medical manuals, church edicts, law cases, song lyrics, and whatever diaries and letters they can find.

Recently, my husband, Richard L. Rapson, and I summarized this impressive research in: *Love, Sex, and Intimacy: Their Psychology, Biology, and History*, and also in *Love and Sex: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. (The first book details everything scientists and scholars know about passionate love and intimacy in the West, including the formation, maintenance, and ending of relationships. The second text considers passionate love worldwide.)

In the very near future, I suspect that social psychologists will be well on the way to answering some of the questions that have plagued researchers for centuries. These inquiries will undoubtedly raise hackles in some quarters of society, but the quest for knowledge and understanding cannot be stilled for very long.

Senator Proxmire may not have intended it, but in Greek mythology the search for the Golden Fleece was considered a noble and heroic undertaking—as indeed it has proven itself to be.

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