

This is your brain on sex: the science behind the search for love
Kayt Sukel

An author able to penetrate and explain some very interesting science

Every book is written from a perspective. This one is from the perspective of a divorced mother of a five-year-old who is still quite interested in sex and/or marriage. Kayt Sukel is a thoroughly modern woman. She is career-oriented and successful. She has made a mark in the highly competitive world of authoring articles for quality magazines, and with this she makes her book debut.

Although her mastery of the science of sex sets her apart, Sukel's thinking is quite mainstream for modern American campuses. There is nothing that will challenge prevailing views. She starts out by defining love. Rather, she discourses at length on how difficult it is to arrive at a single definition. One theme that recurs in several chapters is the idea that sexual love involves at least three separate elements. One is pure lust, which can most closely be explained by the brain chemicals, hormones and genetic factors that she describes. Second is the feeling of being in love, the butterflies in the stomach, distracted sort of feeling that comes of being head over heels. The third is the deep, long-term commitment.

She explains all of these through the use of diagrams of areas of the brain. Our reptilian brains are in control of our most basic functions, and more lately evolved portions drive the reasoning processes which channel and control the reptilian. Although it may not be interesting exactly which areas light up under which stimuli, the very fact that sexologists and neurologists can develop that accurate picture of what's going on in the brain is really pretty amazing. In her chapter on orgasm, she modestly presents a time series of images of her own brain as she was wired into an MRI. Scientists definitely have a clue what's going on in there.

All that said, the brain is a highly complex organ. There are large numbers of chemicals: oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin to name three, each of which fills multiple functions. There are receptors for these chemicals, which may in turn do double duty, servicing two or more of them. Hormones govern the release of them, singularly or in groups. Even at a chemical level, it is difficult to arrive at definite conclusions. This is one of Sukel's strong points. She is content to describe the science as it stands, without feeling a need to stretch beyond what scientists know. In saying that scientists do not know what makes people fall in love, what makes love last, and what exactly pheromones are and do.

She talks about a rhesus monkey named Casanova was able to suppress his desire to mate in the interests of maintaining his social standing within a rhesus community into which he had been recently introduced. Not knowing the lay of the land, so to speak, he refused to get involved with the females came on to him. This is a very telling episode. It indicates that even in our primate relatives, and presumably our ancestors, reason and the upper hand over lust. We can control our emotions. She goes on to credit us with generally knowing when to keep our pants zipped and to avoid adventures that will jeopardize our relationships, our social standing and our pocketbooks.

Sokel's last chapter deals with love of divine beings, the love of God and others. It is curiously narrow. She talks about the way that love manifests itself in the individual – the same kinds of chemical and hormonal involvement as romantic love. She does not talk about it at all from the perspective of religious people. It is useful to note that fundamentalists preachers talk ad nauseum about the three Greek words for love: eros, filios, and agape, if I remember them right. One is romantic, the second is brotherly, and the third is love of all mankind. There is kind of a misfit here: she speaks of believers loving Christ as a person, whereas Christians speak of three different ways of loving one another, but no special way of loving Christ except “with all your heart.”

The question of how religious people love is interesting because however misguided their beliefs, religious people seem to be the only ones who are successful in creating offspring and passing their beliefs on down to those offspring. Whatever one may think of Mormons and Muslims, one has to respect the fact that they breed true. The rest of us do not. This is a factor which is not even discussed in Sokel's book. I think it is relevant: the evolutionary purpose of sex is actually procreation, not self-fulfillment or recreation. If you do not have offspring, and do not raise them to have their own offspring, your seed dies out. There is some kind of love involved in the process. I doubt that it can be defined very well by hormones and chemicals, but I think that there is more research to be done on the higher functions of the brain involved in religious love, and then channeling Sokel's three forms of love – lust, romance and devotion - into the process of creating and nurturing the next generation.

In a book which refuses to take a strong stand on any issue Sokel goes out of her way to stress that the chemical reactions involved in homosexual love are pretty much identical to those in heterosexual love. She repeats the claim that gay people are pretty much that way from birth. This is the best supported statement of the claim that I have encountered. Her certainty on this one issue seems rather inconsistent with her refusal to take sides on other issues, but it does give strong credence to the gay community's claims.

I include Sokel's table of contents below, a good guide to the content of the book.

Chapter 1: The Neuroscience Of Love: A History

Chapter 2: The Ever Loving Brain

Chapter 3: The Chemicals Between Us

Chapter 4: Epigenetics (Or It Is All My Mother's Fault)

Chapter 5: Our Primates, Ourselves (Or Why We Are Not Slaves To Our Hormones)

Chapter 6: His And Her Brains

Chapter 7: The Neurobiology Of Attraction

Chapter 8: Making Love Last

Chapter 9: The Mommy (And Daddy) Brain

Chapter 10: Might As Well Face It, You're Addicted To Love

Chapter 11: Your Cheating Mind

Chapter 12: My Adventures With The O Team

Chapter 13: A Question Of Orientation

Chapter 14: Stupid Is As Stupid Loves

Chapter 15: There's A Thin Line Between Love And Hate

Chapter 16: The Greatest Love Of All

Conclusion: A Brave New World Of Love