

Love, money and suspicion

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Alfred Hitchcock's 1941 film *Suspicion* is a masterful psychological study of love and money. Cary Grant plays the charming but irresponsible Johnnie Aysgarth, who dazzles the frumpy Lina McLaidlaw, played by Joan Fontaine. Only after their elopement does Lina begin piecing together the truth about her husband: He is broke, a habitual gambler, a liar, an embezzler—and possibly a killer. Indeed, everywhere Lina looks she sees signs that Johnnie is plotting her murder to secure his fortune.

What makes this thriller so powerful is that it plays off two of our most potent human impulses. Everyone yearns to connect, to be liked and wanted, to love—that's the psychological foundation of friendship, marriage and human community. But equally powerful is our basic need for personal freedom and self-sufficiency—including financial independence. Money makes us feel strong and secure and unencumbered, so we want to conserve it. But what happens when this fundamentally anti-social impulse—to disconnect and remain apart—conflicts with our most social human urge to connect?

A team of psychological scientists has come up with an ingenious way to study this question in the laboratory. Jia (Elke) Liu of the University of Groningen, in the Netherlands, and her colleagues* recruited a group of men and women to fill out a questionnaire on a computer. The questionnaire wasn't really important. What was important was the background of the computer screen: For some of the volunteers, the screen showed currency, while for others it showed seashells. The currency was an unconscious prime, intended to get only some of the volunteers thinking about money—and security and self-sufficiency and freedom.

Immediately afterward, the volunteers went into another room, where they took part in a ten-minute conversation with another person. Unknown to the volunteers, this person was part of the study, a confederate who had been given instructions beforehand. In some cases, the confederate mimicked the volunteer's actions—deliberately but unobtrusively matching posture and gestures; in other cases there was no mimicry. Normally, this kind of subtle mimicry fosters rapport and good feelings; it's a way of signaling a desire for human connection, which is what the scientists wanted to do here.

So some of the volunteers were primed for thoughts of money, and the rest were not. And half of each of these groups was then exposed to pro-social mimicry, the rest not. The idea was to see how these thoughts and feelings interact in the mind. The scientists suspected—and predicted—that social mimicry would have a perverse effect on the volunteers' emotions if done in the presence of money—threatening them rather than bonding them. In other words, what would normally be a welcome sign of human affiliation would be seen as a threat to personal freedom—the lab equivalent of receiving a marriage proposal from someone who you suspect is a gold digger.

So it was love or money. And the results, reported in the on-line version of the journal *Psychological Science*, clearly support the view that money and love conflict in the human mind. When the scientists measured the volunteers' unconscious feelings, those with both money and mimicry on their minds were

the ones who felt most threatened. And they were only threatened by those who made the gesture of affiliation, as if they were suspicious of this common way of expressing warmth. What's more, they found those who mimicked them to be personally less likable—not anybody they would choose to spend time with. It appears that, head to head, the longing for freedom trumps the urge to connect. Put another way, love is powerful, but money can transform this deep emotion into another potent human emotion—suspicion.

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Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought*, will soon be out in paperback. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *Scientific American Mind* and *The Huffington Post*.