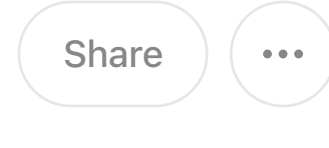
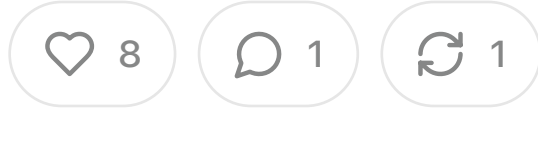


# Beyond Zero-Sum Thinking: Love, Like Resources, Does Not Run Out

A new study shows us that the idea of “inexhaustibility” applies just as well to intangible assets as to physical ones.

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A recent study titled “[Love Doesn’t Run Out: Children and Adults Do Not View Social Resources as Inherently Zero-Sum](#)” argues that the human capacity for care and affection has no obvious upper limit. When researchers asked children and adults about the distribution of love and kindness, participants largely rejected the notion that warmth and support are finite commodities. Note the similarity between that finding and the broader thesis that Gale L. Pooley and I advance in our 2022 book [Superabundance](#): When people innovate and collaborate, resources become practically inexhaustible.

The study’s most provocative conclusion is that people, even from a young age, do not typically treat love as zero-sum. In other words, caring for one child, spouse, or friend need not diminish affection for another. When subjects were asked whether a person’s love might be “used up” by having multiple recipients, most insisted that affection could stretch to encompass new connections. Participants of different ages concurred that love and supportive emotions are not strictly limited. That contrasts with old clichés about jealousy or parental favorites. The data suggest that most individuals naturally view social bonds as expandable.

As Pooley and I show, innovation, problem-solving, and cumulative stock of knowledge empower us to multiply what is possible from seemingly limited physical means. Yet, just as a clever engineer finds new oil fields or ways to yield more energy from the same volume of fuel, human relationships appear to expand indefinitely. A mother of three need not ration her warmth, the same way a market teeming with entrepreneurs need not remain locked in a zero-sum scramble for limited wealth. Instead, she can cultivate growing affection for each child, complementing the love they share among siblings.

This phenomenon can be understood as a “love multiplier,” analogous to the time price of material goods discussed in our research. Pooley and I have shown that as the population rises and ideas proliferate, the abundance of resources often grows faster than demand, driving down real costs relative to time. Similarly, when individuals share attention, empathy, and kindness, these social goods tend to expand in circulation. Humanity can benefit from a continuous, virtuous cycle in which giving fosters more giving.

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Skeptics might note that emotional labor can be exhausting. True, humans have limitations in time and energy. However, the study illustrates that we do not perceive love itself as a resource that is drained beyond repair. Individuals still structure boundaries to avoid burnout, but few interpret the innate capacity to care as a pie with only so many slices. Love, in this sense, might operate much like knowledge: Transmitting it and spreading it do not need to reduce what the giver retains.

Our experience with technological progress offers a helpful parallel: The spread of the internet did not kill communication among human beings; it accelerated it by creating new networks and allowing people to learn from each other in real time. Social resources follow a comparable logic. Providing attention, affection, and supportive relationships unlocks reciprocal benefits. The mere existence of robust, affectionate families indicates that love is additive rather than depleting.

The study, in other words, suggests that the idea of “inexhaustibility” applies just as well to an intangible asset like love as to a physical one like oil. Yes, it’s encouraging that the real price of natural resources typically declines over time when measured in labor hours, but it’s equally heartening to recognize that human beings naturally resist artificial scarcity in their relationships. Whereas some might assume people cling tightly to love, the new research supports the view that such hoarding instincts are not our default.

Ultimately, recognizing that love need not be a zero-sum game restores faith in humanity’s remarkable capacity to grow both materially and emotionally. If children grasp the idea that caring can be boundless, then surely our societies can foster a broader culture of resource expansion in every sense.

We stand to benefit not only from tangible innovations—cheaper energy, cleaner water, and more advanced medicine—but also from the immeasurable yet equally important domain of human affection. The lesson is clear: Love, like physical resources, need not be rationed.

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