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Romantic Love and Marriage: An Analysis of the Concept and Functionality of Romantic Love as a Marital Stabilizing Agent

Emily Sorrell

Abstract: When identifying the central components that constitute general social structures, one cannot overlook the integral role that marriage, in its many manifestations, plays in the make-up of human societies. Marriage, or the ultimate extension of pair bonding, developed largely as a cultural adaptation to the reproduction of slowly developing human offspring and hence can be viewed as a method of maximizing reproductive fitness. If this assumption is correct, then one may presume that it would be beneficial to humans and their reproductive success to engage in marriages of relative stability. Hence, it would be reasonable to assume that there must be methods of stabilizing marriages in all societies. This paper will examine the relationship that exists between romantic love and marriage, as well as the functional role that love may play as a stabilizing agent in certain matrimonial unions.

Recent research indicates that romantic love is a fairly universal concept, yet it is not universally considered an important factor in marriage (Jankowiak & Fischer 1992). This paper will discuss the relationship between romantic love and marriage, as well as the factors that appear to make love an important part of a matrimonial agreement. The following is an attempt to demonstrate the functionality of romantic love, in the sense that love may act as a basis for stabilizing marriage in some societies.

In discussing romantic love, current approaches seem to view this as a near universal concept, as it seems to be a present cultural attribute in 89 percent of contemporary societies (Jankowiak 1995). Studies dealing with the concept of love seem to emphasize the functionality of romantic attachment, either in terms of its possible stabilizing power in marriage or its importance as an evolutionary adaptation designed to maintain pair bonds and their associated reproductive contracts. The body of literature in the realm of romantic

love seems to view love as a functional and adaptive concept rather than a random cultural phenomenon. Hence, researchers seem to approach romantic love as a complex three dimensional concept, whereby its expression is controlled by an interaction of varied biological, psychological and cultural factors. William R. Jankowiak suggests that “romantic passion is a complex multifaceted emotional phenomenon that is a byproduct of interplay between biology, self, and society. It is this complexity that separates romantic passion from other more basic emotions that are readily experienced, easily recognized, and, thus, understandable around the world” (1995: 4).

This suggests that while there appears to be an extensive amount of literature detailing the research surrounding the idea of romantic love, the consensus seems to be that love is an incredibly difficult concept to quantify or operationalize, thus making it difficult to produce a definitive body of research in this area. According to Leonard Plotnicov, “irrefutable evidence of romantic love is virtually impossible to obtain even under optimal conditions because it depends on subjective evaluation and self-reporting or imprecise objective criteria” (1995: 138). The anthropological literature tackling the topic of romantic love concerns possible factors that make love an integral part of general social structure and marriage in certain societies, such as modes of subsistence dependence, sexual equality and post-marital residence rules.

One cannot overstate the significance that lies in understanding the relationship between love and marriage, as both are critical elements of humanity. Understanding love as a functioning agent in maintaining marital stability allows us to better understand an important part of who we are as humans. Hence, as a basic building block of human social structure, romantic love and its role in the maintenance of society is an incredibly important area of research. Much of the anthropological community agrees that romantic love does constitute a valid area of research, and hopes to repair the general oversight of love that occurred in earlier ethnographic work (Jankowiak 1992 and Fischer 1992).

In order to analyze the relationship between romantic love and marriage, it is necessary to compare current thinking with respect to this theme. It is also important to research and discuss love in terms of its functional role in society, or more appropriately, its functional role in marriage. As love appears to be a universal element of human societies, it is necessary to address the factors that make this concept an integral part of marriage in certain societies. In essence, love is important as a functional concept in marriage under certain cultural

conditions, and the purpose of the following is to determine what those cultural conditions are.

The results of this research approach the problem of romantic love as a stabilizing basis for marriage under certain conditions from a number of directions. To begin with, it is important to investigate how researchers define the abstract concept of love as well as how they determine its presence or absence in a particular society. Psychologist Paul Rosenblatt was one of the first researchers to establish a system designed to systematically measure romantic love by developing a cross-cultural, eleven-point scale based on eleven criteria extracted from the HRAF categories 581 (Basis for Marriage) and 831 (Sexuality). These criteria include: (1) the idealization of potential spouse, especially of traits not directly related to capacity to satisfy material needs, (2) ethnographer states romantic love is important, (3) marriages are not arranged, (4) non-compelled, idealization-based faith and loyalty to mate are common, (5) high incidence of elopement in societies where marriages are typically arranged, (6) married individuals give nonobligated gifts to one another and spend spare time together, (7) belief in predestination for marriage partners, (8) suicide over unrequited love, (9) people gain happiness and pleasure from marriage, (10) noncompelled mourning at the death of a spouse, and (11) jealousy that reflects "strong attachment" (Rosenblatt 1967: 475). According to Rosenblatt, "raters were instructed to give higher scores on importance of romantic love as a basis for marriage 'the more clearly, strongly, and predominately' romantic love was as a basis for marital unions" (1967: 474-5). While the results of this rating of romantic love were used to analyze the relationship between love and marital residence patterns in this particular study, these criteria paved the way for research dealing with romantic love, as it created a more objective method for determining the presence or absence of love in a society.

William Jankowiak's work on romantic love has further quantified this concept by developing additional indices that suggest the presence of romantic love. It is important to note that his indices borrow from and synthesize the above criteria established by Rosenblatt. In an important paper co-authored by Edward Fischer, Jankowiak solidifies a working definition of romantic love as "any intense attraction that involves the idealization of the other, within an erotic context, with the expectation of enduring for some time into the future" (1992: 150)." In an attempt to demonstrate the universality of love, Jankowiak and Fischer looked for the presence of six indicators in a sample of 166 societies and consequently coded each society as (a) love present or (b) love absent on the basis of their criteria (1992: 152).

These indices include: “accounts depicting personal anguish and longing, the use of love songs or folklore that highlight the motivations behind romantic involvement, elopement due to mutual affection, native accounts affirming the existence of passionate love, and the ethnographer’s affirmation that romantic love is present” (Jankowiak & Fischer 1992: 152). It is important to note that this study only examined the first two years of involvement between individuals. This reflects the psychological studies that draw a clear distinction between romantic passion and the companionship phase of love, sometimes referred to as attachment (Jankowiak 1995: 4). This distinction further defines the concept of romantic love as utilized in this study.

Additionally, psychologists have created a list of seven core properties that “are common to the experience of fully being in love within almost any cultural setting” (Harris 1995: 100). These attributes include the desire for union, idealization of the beloved, exclusivity, intrusive thinking about the love object, emotional dependency, a reordering of motivational hierarchies or life priorities, and a powerful sense of empathy and concern for the beloved. Harris goes on to state that “the existence of romantic love can be recognized in the perceived specialness of another individual” (100-101). This study further elucidates the criteria that researchers have searched for in societies in order to determine the existence of love, whether in poetry, stories, or stated affirmations of affection recorded by ethnographers.

Hence, the above studies have provided researchers with an operationalized definition of love, whereby a set of criteria was developed that helps indicate the presence or absence of romantic love in a society. These definitions are employed in several of the following studies, and have enabled researchers to more objectively analyze a very abstract and personal phenomenon.

After developing a means of studying the concept of romantic love, Jankowiak and Fischer employed the above indices in order to document its existence in a cross-cultural sample of the world’s societies. They were able to document the presence of romantic love in 88.5 percent of a sample of cultures obtained from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Jankowiak & Fischer 1992: 152). In a later work, Jankowiak was able to document love in two more societies, bringing the current total to 89 percent (Jankowiak 1995). He concludes that these data suggest that romantic love is a near-universal concept. In this way, he hoped to eliminate the earlier assumptions that romantic love is a uniquely Western phenomenon.

His later work builds on this research by compiling a series of articles further discussing the topic of romantic love, including articles that even suggest that romantic attachment is a biological adaptation of

the human brain that maximizes reproductive success. He notes that “worldwide data on the duration of marriage and timing of divorce suggest that the brain physiology for human attraction, attachment, and detachment evolved in conjunction with our primary human reproductive strategy” (1995: 29). Jankowiak suggests that many researchers believe that romantic love evolved as a means of improving human reproductive strategies through a concentration of parental investment. Thus, Jankowiak and Fischer’s documentation of the universality of love set an important precedent, encouraging researchers to examine the adaptiveness of this cultural trait. However, the aforementioned studies do not explain why this apparently universal concept, biologically and psychologically, is only an important basis for marriage in a select sample of societies. The following is an analysis of the research that has been conducted with the goal of explaining which *cultural* factors determine the importance of romantic love as a basis for marriage.

In a cross-cultural study, Rosenblatt and Cozby found an association between freedom of choice in choosing a spouse and greater romantic love as a basis for marriage. In their research, they found that “the greater the freedom of choice, the greater also was the degree of exaggeration of qualities (versus objectivity), the more important was sex as a source of attraction, and the more important were feelings of affection and courtly love” (Rosenblatt & Cozby 1972: 693). Additionally, they associated freedom of choice with greater male-female contact, greater frequency of dances, and community endogamy. This research indicates that where individuals are granted more freedom of choice when choosing a spouse, romantic love is a more important basis for marriage, leading to impractical mate choices and increased relational antagonism (Rosenblatt & Cozby: 1972). Impractical mate choices were defined as choices that were not based on practical grounds which include “food-getting skills, value of alliances created by the marriage, just plain proximity, rank, personality, food preparation skills, strength and health” (693). This suggests that in many ways, arranged marriages are meant to avoid the risks associated with freedom of choice, as they are designed around entirely practical grounds such as alliance formation or rank, which in certain societies may be beneficial to the couple or the associated kin groups. Additionally, antagonism includes “insulting, teasing, verbal argument, physical battles, wrestling, stone throwing, and playing pranks” (694). Rosenblatt and Cozby attribute the increased relational antagonism to “the strong emotionality of courtship coupled with ambiguity of situation in societies with a great deal of freedom of choice” (Ibid).

A second piece conducted by Rosenblatt attempted to establish a relationship between post-marital residence rules and romantic love. As previously noted, it was in this study that Rosenblatt created a systemic method of measuring love in societies. In a sample of 75 societies, he rated the importance of romantic love based on his eleven criteria. He then divided these societies based on their neolocal or non-neolocal post-marital residence rules and found that the 59 strictly non-neolocal societies rated romantic love as more important (10.54 on his 11-point scale) than the 6 neolocal societies, whose mean rating of romantic love was 4.67 (1967: 476). His results indicate that “the obtained relationship between marital residence and romantic love may mean that romantic love is maladaptive in a neolocal society” (477). Hence, his research showed that romantic love was found to be most important as a basis for marriage in societies with non-neolocal marital residence and least important in neolocal societies. However, this contradicts the existence of romantic love in neolocal societies such as the United States. He explains this deviation as follows:

the unusually high level of romantic love in neolocal, industrialized societies may result from a sophisticated technology of communication, which exposes families in such societies to some divisive pressures typical of non-neolocal societies, and from the low level of economic interdependence of spouses in industrialized societies, which creates a need for sources of cohesion alternative to economic interdependence (1967: 479).

Hence, his findings indicate that while marital residence does show a correlation to the importance of love as a basis for marriage, it may be other factors associated with these residence patterns that actually affect the expression of love, such as divisive pressures from relatives and the levels of economic dependence.

Rosenblatt continues this line of thought in a study done in conjunction with Coppinger, in which they examine the relationship between subsistence dependence and the importance of romantic love as a basis for marriage. Coppinger and Rosenblatt hypothesize that subsistence dependence is an important source of marital stability in many societies, and suggest that where this dependence is low or absent, that love becomes a replacement. They defined subsistence dependence as a “measure of the degree of balance of division of labor by sex” (Coppinger & Rosenblatt 1968: 312). In an analysis of gender, Mascia-Lees and Black have defined the sexual division of labor, in that “the division classifies tasks into those that can be performed by men and those by women. Men and women must, therefore, depend on

one another since each is incapable of doing all the tasks necessary for survival” (Maschia-Lees & Black 2000: 73). This division of labor creates high levels of subsistence dependence. Hence, in societies with a strict division of labor, men and women are highly dependent upon one another and this serves to maintain the pair bond without expressions of romantic love. Coppinger and Rosenblatt rated the balance of the division of labor and the importance of romantic love as a basis of marriage using a sample of 55 cultures with non-neolocal marital residence. They rated the importance of love using Rosenblatt’s 11-point scale established in a prior study and they found a significant correlation between these variables, supporting their hypothesis that the greater the imbalance in division of labor by sex, the more important romantic love is as a basis of marriage. Thus, they conclude that “romantic love serves, among other things, to establish and maintain marital bonds in the face of the divisiveness of weak bonds of economic dependence” (Coppinger & Rosenblatt 1968: 314).

The above research has not only guided current studies in the field of romantic love, but other researchers have revisited these studies and either drawn from the results to further develop an understanding of the function of romantic love, or they have challenged the methods utilized. Carol Mukhopadhyay challenges the results of the 1968 Coppinger and Rosenblatt study that cites a correlation between subsistence dependence and romantic love, suggesting that the introduction of a third variable, subsistence technology, “virtually eliminates the empirical support for the study and emerges as the stronger predictor of romantic love” (Mukhopadhyay 1979: 60). Additionally, she challenges their testing procedures and their measures of economic interdependency and romantic love. With a closer look at her research, it appears that she defines subsistence technology as a rating of the intensity of agricultural production, from the absence of agriculture to the presence of intensive irrigation agriculture. She argues that there is a stronger correlation between technology and romantic love than there is between love and economic dependence, a finding that she suggests warrants further investigation (Mukhopadhyay 1979).

Lastly, in a recent study, de Munck and Korotayev propose that there will be a positive correlation between the importance of romantic love and social indicators of sexual equality and permissiveness, in that societies which permit premarital and/or extramarital sex for both sexes will consider romantic love as a more important basis for marriage than societies in which this is prohibited (1999). These researchers use the eleven criteria for measuring the importance of romantic love in marriage in the HRAF but test a

different set of hypotheses. Using Rosenblatt's scale, they found support for their argument with regard to females only, suggesting that, "it is not just a blanket prohibition against extramarital sex but specifically a prohibition against females and not against males that inhibits the development of romantic love" (de Munck & Korotayev 1999: 272). In this sense, they argue that the existence of sexual equality in a particular society is an important factor in determining if romantic love is an important basis in marriage. This study focuses on the link between sex and romantic love, something that they argue not all researchers agree upon.

As a complete whole, these findings begin to answer some of the questions posed above. These studies employed cross-cultural research in order to (1) establish a methodological system for determining the existence of romantic love in a particular society (Rosenblatt 1967; Jankowiak & Fischer 1992; Harris 2000), (2) establish the universality of romantic love, and (3) examine some of the cultural factors that make romantic love an important basis in marriage in certain societies but not others. However, the cultural constructions discussed in the above studies do not create a complete list of factors that affect the importance of romantic love. Additionally, the studies analyzed in this paper discuss love and other mechanisms as possible stabilizing agents, but fail to provide ways by which to measure the relative stability of a marital union. For example, in the study by Coppinger and Rosenblatt, they state that "Dependence of marriage partners upon one another for subsistence is probably an important source of marital stability" (Coppinger & Rosenblatt 1968: 310). They do not provide a definition of marital stability, making it difficult to identify a clear relationship between love and stability. However, there is a distinct correlation between subsistence dependence and love. Assumptions such as this regarding marital stability make it difficult to definitively conclude that romantic love is emphasized in certain societies in order to replace other sources of stability. It would be helpful to further research the indicators of marital stability, such as divorce rates and number of spouses. However, from the above research, one can begin to get an idea of some of the cultural mechanisms that regulate the degree to which love is emphasized as a basis for marriage, although the research included in this investigation fails to concretely demonstrate the ways in which love contributes to marital stability. Additionally, the demonstrated correlations between romantic love and specific cultural patterns, such as arranged marriages or marital residence rules, provide a better understanding of the origin and purpose of these variable social mechanisms.

Conclusion

While research indicates that romantic love may have evolved as a fairly universal psychological emotion, it is the interplay of several cultural mechanisms that determine the degree to which this emotion is emphasized and expressed. Since this abstract concept is difficult to objectively study, researchers have had to develop a set of criteria that indicate the presence, absence and relative importance of love in societies. In doing so, they have found that patterns of marital residence, subsistence dependence, sexual equality, and courtship patterns all correlate with the degree to which romantic love is valued. Hence, this creates a short list of cultural mechanisms that regulate the expression of romantic love. The variability with which love is valued as a basis for marriage suggests that in societies where love is emphasized, love plays a function in the marital union, whereas societies that employ arranged marriages replace the function of love with other elements, such as subsistence dependence. According to Coppinger and Rosenblatt, "That love would serve as a substitute for subsistence dependence rather than develop in all societies seems likely because love may be costly in some ways for societies. Hence, love seems unlikely to emerge as a cultural pattern where the functions it serves may be accomplished in less costly ways" (Coppinger & Rosenblatt 1968: 311). Hence, the research analyzed in this paper looks at cultural factors that exhibit relationships with romantic love, thus exposing some of the functional purposes of this emotion.

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