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# A Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love

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# A Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love

## Abstract

The article presents a conceptual, historical, anthropological, psychological, and sociological review of cultural perspectives on love: how culture affects our experience and expression of love. The evidence suggests that love is a universal emotion experienced by a majority of people, in various historical eras, and in all the world's cultures, but manifests itself in different ways because culture has an impact on people's conceptions of love and the way they feel, think, and behave in romantic relationships.

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## Introduction

For centuries, romantic love has been explored by writers, philosophers, artists, and musicians who have described its various aspects and revealed multiple emotions and feelings related to this type of love.

Social scientists' systematic efforts to understand romantic love began in the mid-twentieth century, and over recent decades the topic has become popular in scientific research. Scholars from various disciplines—sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists—have greatly advanced the theory of love and identified major love constructs. In the 1980s, scholars from various countries started to delve into the concept of love from evolutionary and cultural perspectives. They were interested to investigate whether romantic love is a universal emotion present in various cultures and how similar and different the attitudes to love and love experience are in different cultures and time periods. Many publications shed light on our understanding of romantic love as a cultural phenomenon. Research by David Buss, Helen Fisher, Ellen Hatfield, Susan Sprecher, Robert Levine, Robin Goodwin, Dan Landis, and Carolyn Simmons and their colleagues in anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communication research substantially expanded our understanding of cross-cultural variation of love across the globe.

The crucial question is whether romantic love is only a western cultural construct, or, given its remote origins in ancient Greece, India and the Islamic world, whether it is a universal in human societies. The basic conclusion was that love is a universal emotion experienced by a majority of people, in various historical eras, and in all the world's cultures, but manifests itself in different ways because culture has been found to have an impact on people's conceptions of love and the way they feel, think, and behave in romantic relationships.

In this article I review romantic love research from a cultural perspective. First, the definition of romantic love is clarified and how it is different from and similar to other kinds of love. Then I present romantic love as a universal emotion across various historical periods of humankind and among contemporary cultures across the globe. Finally, similarities and differences in the feelings and expressions of love across cultures will be reported.

## Concept of Romantic Love

It seems that love is a universal and biologically based emotion; when a man or woman is in love they know about this from their gut feelings, without words. Cross-cultural and cross-language barriers do not matter for them. The verbal and non-verbal communication makes it possible. People are so curious about how to say "I Love You" in other languages. *Je t'aime* (French), *Ich liebe Dich* (German), *Ti amo* (Italian), "wo ai ni" (Chinese), *Mahal kita* (Tagalog). Diverse words express love in many languages (see [love you in 100 languages: http://www.delafee.com/Gift+Service+%22I+love+you%22+in+100+languages/](http://www.delafee.com/Gift+Service+%22I+love+you%22+in+100+languages/)).

The following words are probably among the most well-known internationally: *love* (English), *amor* (Spanish), *amour* (French), *amore* (Italian), *Liebe* (German). These words may have various implicit connotations; they carry many different meanings and reflect plenty of forms and categories of love. The experiences and expressions of love may be different depending on a situation: (1) first encounter, (2) meeting again, (3) unrequited love, (4) risk of losing the beloved one, or (4) the beloved one will never return. These feelings can be joy and elation, jealousy, nostalgia, etc.

The term “romantic love” seems to have been coined by 19<sup>th</sup> century literary critic Gaston Paris to denote a particular constellation of attitudes and patterns of behavior that characterized a body of literature arising in Provence in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Paris, 1883). *Amour courtois* (*Courtly love*) had the following general attributes: an elevation of the status of the woman, a suffering caused by passionate attraction to and separation from the beloved, and a transformation of the lovers which elevates them onto a separate plane of existence, the world of lovers, in which life is experienced more intensely (Paris, 1883). Originally considered a uniquely European phenomenon (Doi, 1973; Hsu, 1985; Stone, 1989), more recent research has shown precursors and analogues of romantic love in Plato’s dialogues, Islamic culture, and ancient Indian writings.

In current scholarship romantic love sounds like a fuzzy concept that is used in literature in broad meaning, being often replaced by passionate love and sexual attraction as synonyms. They all have a lot in common, but still are different. They have to be distinguished for the question of cross-cultural universality of romantic love. Romantic love is the form of love that is most salient in public view, but it has different subcategories; some of them are related to sexual love. Sexuality is not identical with love; however it can become one of the ways that love is experienced and expressed in relationships.

The notion of romantic love as a mixture of sexual desire and affection is paramount in Havelock Ellis’ many-volumes *Study in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928). Ellis concluded that the love is best viewed as a mixture of lust and friendship which includes tenderness and affection. He views romantic love as more than just sexual desire, although he found sexual desire to be an important part of romantic love (1933/1963, p. 234).

Romantic love is closely related to sexual attraction (Fisher, 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007.); however it is a form of love that is different from mere needs driven by sexual desire, or lust (Ellis, 1960; Fromm, 1956; Jankowiak, 1995). Romantic love generally involves a mix of emotional and sexual desire: emotional highs, exhilaration, passion, and elation. Romantic love is passionate, but the passion itself is not the only feature of this type of love. Romance is the fanciful, expressive and pleasurable feeling from an emotional attraction towards another person. There is often more emphasis on the emotions than on physical pleasure. According to dictionaries, **romantic love** is characterized by strong affection and preoccupation with love, unrealistic and idealistic attitude toward a partner, and the feeling that *l’amour toujours* (French) – love forever that never ends and is always there (e.g., <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/romantic>, [http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Romance+\(love\)](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Romance+(love)),

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/romantic>

[http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/romantic](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/romantic)),

Romantic love is often distinguished from platonic love. Platonic love is 'close affection between two persons, attracted to each other, but without sexual intimacy' (Gooch, 1989, p. 360). Cross-sex platonic friendship/love is nonromantic personal relationship between a man and a woman. The relationship is 'nonromantic in the sense that its function is purposefully dissociated from the courtships rights of the actors involved' (O'Meara, 1989, p. 526; see also Kaplan & Keys, 1997). Platonic love is purely spiritual and emotional and presumably free from physical desire. It is exclusively expressed in a non-erotic way and lacks emotional closeness. Sometimes, however, people can experience both types of love. Platonic does not mean that loving, sexual attraction, and passion are absent in the relationship. Yet, they are well monitored and regulated (Kaplan & Keys, 1997). According to Davis and Todd (1982) and Monsour et al. (1993) passion/fascination and exclusiveness are the dimensions distinguishing romantic relationship from platonic cross-sex friendship. The sexual overtones, mutual fascination/passion are minimal or do not exist in many cross-sex platonic friendships (Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Sapadin, 1988), and both partners are free to engage in other cross-sex friendships and in romantic relationships. There is, however, a potential for a change in the relationship from a platonic to a romantic one.

### **Historical Perspectives on Love**

Passion is the most salient feature of romantic love. Some historians contend that passionate love has always existed: in all times and places. As Hatfield and Rapson (2002) comment: "The earliest Western literature abounds in stories of lovers, fictional and real, caught up in a sea of passion and violence..." (p. 308). Yet, passionate attitudes and behaviors have varied dramatically from one culture to another or from one temporal period to the next. Here are some examples:

The Hindu philosopher Vatsayana (India, 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), the author of the *Kama Sutra*, advised men and women to marry for love; the Medieval church condemned such sinful indulgence; the early Egyptians practiced birth control; Classical Greeks rewarded couples who were willing to conceive; Muslims' jealousy locked their wives and concubines away in harems; Sumerian and Babylonian temples were staffed by priests, priestesses, and sacred prostitutes; the ancient Hebrews stoned "godless" prostitutes (Tannahill, 1980). A society's attitudes toward love profoundly altered over time. In the following, changing perspective on love in China and in Europe will be elaborated as examples.

#### **China**

For example, during the early Chinese history, attitudes toward passionate love and sexual desire were generally positive. Yet, these attitudes were not uniform and changed during those epochs. Texts dating back to 168 Before Common Era (B.C.E.) made it clear that

the ancients assumed that love and sexual pleasure were the great joys of life (Ruan, 1991).

In the Late Empire (approximately 1,000 years ago), when the Neo-Confucianists gained political and religious power, Chinese attitudes gradually altered and became more repressive concerning sexuality. Erotic art and literature were often burned. Since neither spouse had chosen each other, it mattered little whether or not they were sexually attracted to each other. Their primary duty was to procreate. The husband was assumed to be biologically destined to seek satisfaction with a variety of women. Concubinage was a typical accompaniment of marriage among the wealthy. The woman was not biologically so destined; her chief function was to give birth to children, and she was expected to remain faithful to her husband (Murstein, 1974, p. 469).

The Chinese considered sex to be a natural and powerful body function, so if the husband felt the need for a stimulating sexual partner, it was acceptable for him to take a concubine. Needless to say, the possibility of a lover for the wife was never entertained except, perhaps, in her fantasies. The status of the concubine varied. Sometimes, she was a servant who did the most menial work and was the object of the husband's sexual needs. In other cases, the concubine might enjoy a high status if there was a strong emotional and sexual interaction with him (Murstein, 1974, p. 475-476).

Displays of love outside marriage were restricted. Even in the event that the partners were highly attracted to each other, it was contrary to custom to express the slightest degree of public affection. An old Chinese saying states,

“When you ascend the bed, act like husband and wife; when you descend to the ground comport yourself like a Chün tzu, - the Confucian ideal of persons of reserved, dignified, superior conduct” (Murstein, 1974, p. 470).

The Confucian model, however, had little influence on the peasant class, the vast majority of the Chinese population. Unlike the gentry wife, the peasant wife had to work very hard to sustain the family, and she exercised corresponding greater power in family decisions (Murstein, 1974, pp. 470-471).

In the People's Republic of China, established in 1949, Communist officials imposed even tighter controls on love and “inappropriate” sexual activity. A puritanical sexual “primness” became firmly established. This assumed a denial of romantic love and affirmed the importance of the collective over the individual. That supposed to be a basic tenet toward which one should direct their affections.

Chinese very carefully distinguished between free choice and free love. There does not appear to be much sexual license, and even casual flirtation was considered gauche. In choosing a spouse, physical attractiveness was immaterial, and love was described in an official booklet as “psychosomatic activity that consumes energy and wastes time” (as quoted in Murstein, 1974, p. 482).

Love did not appear to play a major role in the life of the young Chinese during that period. For the Chinese woman the bed signified a slavery and physical love had a negative coefficient. The Great Leap Forward demanded, in Communist parlance, the

“renunciation of the heart.” Party policy constructed an altruism which assumed that men and women work hard during the day, without being “deflected or confused” by love, sexual desire, or any strivings for private happiness (Gil, 1992, p. 571). “True” happiness was based on spiritual rather than material enjoyment, on public rather than private interest, on collective welfare rather than on individual happiness” (Murstein, 1974, p. 482).

In the 1990s, a rapid transformation of attitudes toward love and sexuality occurred – the topic was no longer a taboo on the mainland of China. Nowadays, many young people, due to globalization, availability of international cinema, the Web, and world travel, have adopted more “liberal” or “worldly” views of passionate love, sexual desire, and romantic and sexual diversity. In China, then, things appear to have come to full circle (Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007).

### **Europe**

European love is another example of diversity of love attitudes in a historical perspective. In Medieval England, especially prior to the end of the 12th century, Christianity influenced the understanding of love. Love was mainly understood as self-sacrificing and unselfish, implying a harmonious, compassionate, affectionate, and benevolent relationship between people rather than a romantic sentiment. It might include sexual attraction or not. Friendship was considered closely related to love in the meaning of corresponding words. (Kalyuga, 2012, p. 76).

When the lexemes *affection* and *Amor* came into English in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, they obtained the meaning of passion and strong sexual attraction as well the meaning of kindness towards a person, fondness, tenderness and *amor* signified “love, affection, friendship” as well as “the tender affections, love towards one of the opposite sex” (Kalyuga, 2012, p. 76).

In the period from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century through to 14<sup>th</sup> century, English literature was gradually becoming less preoccupied with religious topics and grew to be more concerned with ideas of courtly love. From that time romantic feelings were discussed in literature intensely. This was a substantial change in attitude toward love. Many new expressions for love and tenderness came to English, mostly from the French literature where the phenomenon of courtly love had been developed. According to Lewis (1936, 1960), the courtly worship and idealization of a woman was the religion of devotional love. The key feature of courtly love was suffering and longing due to separation from the loved one.

In the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries (“age of Shakespeare”), love was described as a consuming passion, strong illness, or powerful force that is impossible to resist. An increased amount of attention was paid to emotion and romantic imagination. In the Victorian era, romantic love was considered to be a delicate, spiritual feeling—the antithesis of crude, animal lust.

The concept of courtly love developed in many parts of Western and Northern Europe. It remained, however, alien to some other parts of the continent. In Russia, up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of love was still influenced by Christian faith, and the

literature of courtly love became known much later. The change in the attitude to romantic love appeared after the reforms of Peter the Great in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kalyuga, 2012).

The major processes that influenced the understanding of romantic love in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was relaxation of sexual morals in Europe and the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s to early 1970s. Furthermore, some expressions concerning love began to refer to sexual desire.

Thus, throughout time, people have interpreted love variously and embraced different attitudes toward romantic love; they ascribed different meanings to “love.” The concept of love, as well as related words, feelings, and behaviors have been in flux.

### **Anthropological Perspectives on Love**

Some scholars view romantic love as a Western invention not found in other cultures. Western societies are preoccupied with romantic love as the idealization of love. The hero of the American movie is always a romantic lover. The idealization of love is a peculiarly Western phenomenon. In particular, Stone (1989) suggests that romantic love does not exist in non-Western countries, except possibly for the elite of those countries who have the time to cultivate romantic love. Some scholars contend (Doi, 1973; Hsu, 1985) that romantic love is almost unknown in some cultures such as China and Japan.

Recent studies, however, indicate a different perspective. Anthropologists now believe that romantic love, or at least passionate love, is a universal phenomenon and they found evidence of its occurrences in many cultures. Passionate love is a universal emotion, experienced by many people in the world’s cultures (Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; Shaver, Morgan, & Wu, 1996). Evolutionary psychologists contend that passionate love is innate in human nature and is based on biological processes that are universal, applying to people of all cultures.

A landmark study by Jankowiak and Fischer (1992) explored romantic love in 166 cultures around the world. They examined the following indicators of love: young lovers talk about passionate love, recount tales of love, sing love songs, and speak of the longings and anguish of infatuation. The researchers found that romantic love was present in 147 out of 166 cultures (88.5%). For the remaining 19 cultures, there were no signs indicating that people experience romantic love. The results showed that romantic love is nearly universal in the world, yet we cannot draw the conclusion that every person falls in love. Jankowiak and Fischer (1992) suggested that romantic love can be controlled by some cultural variables. It is possible that people fall in love more or less often depending on their culture’s social organization and ideology. For instance, they may fall in love less often when their society disapproves the romantic love. The historical analysis presented earlier in this text demonstrates some supporting evidence.

Anthropologists have explored folk conceptions of love in diverse cultures such as the People’s Republic of China, Indonesia, Turkey, Nigeria, Trinidad, Morocco, the Fulbe of North Cameroun, the Mangrove (an aboriginal Australian community), the Mangaia in

the Cook Islands, Palau in Micronesia, and the Taita of Kenya (see Jankowiak, 1995, for a review of this research). In all these studies, people's conceptions of passionate love appear to be surprisingly similar. Yet, there is evidence that culture has a profound impact on people's definitions of romantic love and on the way they think, feel, and behave in romantic settings (Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007).

Perhaps culture is a main factor that transforms passionate love into romantic love. Passion is universal and based on biological principles of sexual selection, while romance is culture-specific and based on historical and cultural traditions. Universal features primarily relate to evolutionary basics of mate selection important for people's survival. Buss (1994) found that men and women in all societies preferred someone who possessed a dependable character, emotional stability and maturity, and a pleasing disposition. Wallen (1989) revealed that for some traits—such as good looks and financial prospects—gender had a great influence on mate preferences: gender accounted for 40%-45% of the variance, while geographical origin accounted for only 8%-17% of the variance. Men valued the physical appearance and youth of their partners more than did women; women wanted that their mates possess high status and the resources necessary to protect themselves and their children than did men (Buss, 1994).

Cultural values and traditional behaviors influence the expressions and experiences of love and transfer passionate love as primarily based on a sexual attraction into romantic love as an idealized and culturally affected way of loving. Culturally influenced features are ones that pertain to cultural rituals of love and mating. For example, Buss (1994) discovered the powerful impact that culture had on mate preferences. For such traits—as chastity, ambition, and preferred age—culture mattered most: gender accounted for only 5%-16% of the variance, whereas geographical origin accounted for 38%-59% of the variance (Wallen, 1989). In China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel (the Palestinian Arabs), and Taiwan, young people were insistent that their mate should be “chaste,” while in Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and West Germany, most judged chastity to be relatively unimportant. Wallen concluded that the cultural perspective may be more powerful than evolutionary heritage in understanding mate selection.

### **Impact of Biology on People's Experience of Romantic Love**

Love is a universal human emotion that can be experienced and expressed in multiple cultural forms. The world's cultures differ in several cross-culturally related concepts: collectivism or individualism, independence or interdependence, modernism or traditionalism, urbanism or ruralism, affluence or poverty. We may expect that these factors affect the cultural differences in experience and expression of romantic love.

The data on cultural differences on passionate love is controversial. Doherty, Hatfield, Thomson, and Choo (1994) discovered that within the United States, Chinese Americans experience higher levels of passionate love than do European Americans; Pacific Islanders are more likely to experience compassionate love. However, other studies found that European Americans sometimes experience more intense passionate

love than do Chinese Americans (Gao, 2001). Yet, many studies discovered no gender or cultural differences in the experience of passionate love (see for review Feybesse & Hatfield, 2014, July). Evolutionary psychology and neurosciences may explain why passionate love is probably universal and equally intense in different cultures.

The studies of neuroscience indicate a strong biological basis of passionate love. Bartels and Zeki (2000) interviewed young men and women from 11 countries and several ethnic groups who claimed to be “truly, deeply, and madly” in love and then used fMRI (brain imaging) techniques to identify the corresponding brain activities. The authors concluded that passionate love suppresses the activity in the areas of the brain responsible for critical thought. Passion also produced increased activity in the brain areas associated with euphoria and reward, and decreased levels of activity in the areas associated with distress and depression. Activity was restricted to foci in the medial insula and the anterior cingulate cortex and, subcortically, in the caudate nucleus, and the putamen, all bilaterally. Deactivations were observed in the posterior cingulate gyrus and in the amygdala and were right-lateralized in the prefrontal, parietal, and middle temporal cortices.

The researchers do not report any cross-cultural differences in the participants' experience of passionate love since their sample size for each culture was too small to allow for statistical inference regarding this. However, given that also maternal love gives almost identical activation patterns (Bartels & Zeki, 2004), and given that the results are highly similar to those in several other species (see Figure 1), Bartels believes it is highly likely that these core regions that they report to be modulated by love will be preserved across cultures and even species (personal communication, October 6, 2014).

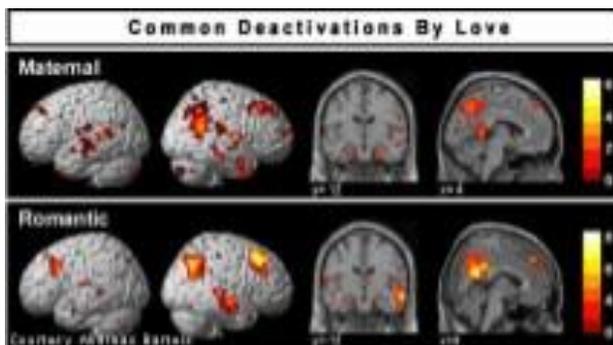


Figure 1. Patterns of brain activity by love (courtesy of A. Bartels)

Ortigue et al. (2010) revealed interesting results regarding the deep biological foundation of romantic love located in the brain (Love on the Brain, by Roger Dobson, October 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/love-on-the-brain-2096672.html>). Brain scan using fMRI technique have found only small differences in brain region stimulations related to earlier romantic relationships even if comparing the results of two very different cultures like America and China (Xu et al., 2010). The brain regions associated with romantic love

seem to be very primitive ones leading scholars to conclude that love feelings were always present in hominid evolution (Fisher, 2004).

Neuroscientist Lucy Brown studied the brain of people who are in love and found that many parts of the brain are activated including a “primitive” part of the brain just above the brainstem (<http://trbq.org/trbq-podcast-1-the-science-of-love/>). People who are madly in love and asked to think about their beloved tend to show activity in the ventral tegmental area (left arrow), associated with euphoria and addiction. This subject also has activity in the prefrontal cortex (right arrow), associated with thinking and reward (see Figure 2).

These findings confirm that passionate love is rooted in very basic evolutionary system. Passionate love served to guarantee mate selection, long-term romantic relationships, and the survival of our species. Helen Fisher’s TED talk *The Brain in Love* at [http://www.ted.com/talks/helen\\_fisher\\_studies\\_the\\_brain\\_in\\_love?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_studies_the_brain_in_love?language=en) is very convincing in this regard.

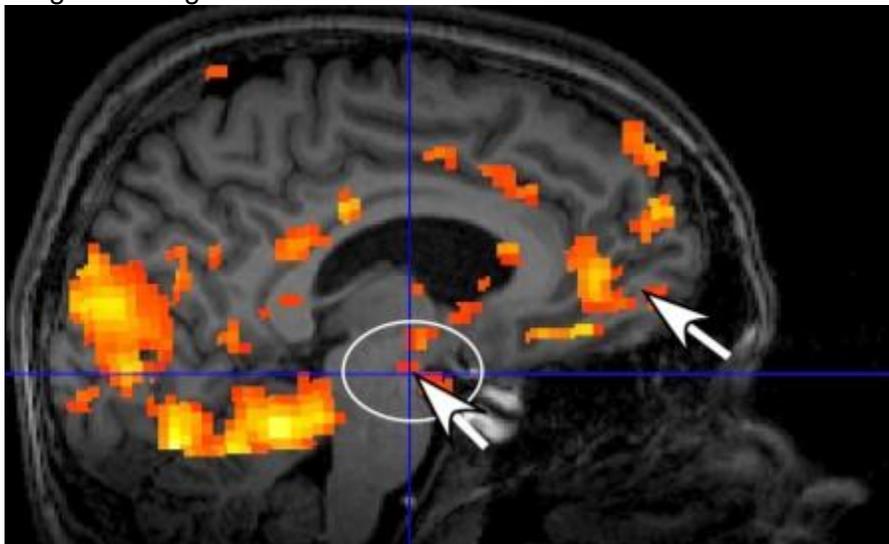


Figure 2. MRI brain image of people who are in love. Credit: L. Brown.

<http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-02-04/scientists-say-they-ve-found-romantic-love-brain-scans>

### **Impact of Culture on People’s Experience of Romantic Love**

Culture may have a powerful influence on how people link passionate love and sexual desire (Hatfield & Rapson, 2005). Many men, for example, are taught to separate sex and love, while many women are taught to connect the two. The different meanings attributed to love have caused lovers much stress (Hatfield & Rapson, 2006).

How can the emphasis of culture on collectivism and individualism affect romantic subjective experience? Individualistic cultures such as the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, and the countries of Northern and Western Europe focus more on self-interest and the interest of one’s immediate family, personal autonomy and making your own decisions, individual initiative, and independence. Collectivist cultures such as China, many African and Latin American nations, Greece, southern Italy, and the Pacific Islands,

on the other hand, induce people to subordinate personal motivation to the group's interests, being loyal to the group that in turn looks after their interests. They encourage interdependence and suggest that group decisions are more important than individual ones (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Triandis and his colleagues state that in individualistic cultures, young people are allowed to "do their own thing"; in collectivist cultures, the group comes first.

Cross-cultural researchers proposed that extensive experience of romantic love should be more common in modern countries with their individualistic culture (Goode, 1959; Rosenblatt, 1967). It should be less valued in traditional collectivistic cultures with strong, extended family ties (Simmons, Vom Kolke, & Shimizu, 1986).

However, research showed more complex findings and interpretation. Individualism is characterized by a desire to be self-sufficient. People tend to experience any dependency, both of the person on other people and of other people on the person, with ambivalence. Yes, in individualistic cultures love-based marriage is perceived as an ideal. However, a person's motivation to be independent can conflict with the need for a romantic partner. So it is reasonable to assume that individualism affects love for a partner in a negative way and individualism may interfere with a loving relationship. Karen and Kenneth Dion (1991) found that people who are more individualistic exhibit less likelihood of ever having been in love. Such people also more likely endorsed a ludic love style, which involves a less intimate perspective on love. Greater individualism was associated with a perception of their relationships as less rewarding and less deep. Generally, the more individualistic a person, the lower the quality of experience of love for his or her partner. In analysis of data from the General Social Survey for the year 1993, Dion and Dion (2005) found that people who are high in individualism tend to report less happiness in their marriages as well as lower satisfaction with their family life and friends.

In collectivistic cultures, people experience the dependencies in their lives being embedded in multiple relationships with their family and close friends. Therefore, when people make decisions in their romantic relationships, they take into account both what they think is best for them as well as how this affects their other relationships. Collectivism is related to the view of love as pragmatic, based on friendship, and having altruistic goals (Dion & Dion, 2005). Women in collectivistic cultures endorse an altruistic view of love more commonly than women in individualistic cultures; they consequently place greater emphasis on a broader network of close friendships (K. K. Dion & Dion, 1993; K. L. Dion & Dion, 1993).

Individualism and collectivism lead to differences in how people conceptualize themselves, and this has a significant impact on how they love and what they experience in love. From an individualistic view, each person is a separate entity; from a collectivistic view, the individual is a part of more extended relationships. When one perceives him/herself as an individual with boundaries and separate from other people, loving for someone else is the chance to break through those boundaries and escape the loneliness caused by being a separate individual. Love becomes the bridge that connects a person to another one. This connection, however, implies a person's freedom. If a relationship does

not give him/her what they expect, it is their choice whether to leave the relationship. This is why people in individualistic cultures place a great emphasis on romantic love.

From a collectivistic perspective, people emphasize the bonds that they already have. Since each person is a part of the relationships, people do not expect it as necessary to verbally confirm those bonds by asking if another loves them or by announcing their love to someone else. Their love is expressed more by what they do than by what they say (Dion & Dion, 2006).

### **Experience of love and being in love**

Some cross-cultural studies looked into specific features of romantic love and support empirically the impact of individualistic and collectivist values. De Munck, Korotayev, de Munck, and Khaltourina (2011) compared the United States, Lithuania, and Russia. They found that people from all three countries agreed on the following characteristics as the “core” of romantic love: (1) the eros component of love (physical attraction), (2) the essence of altruistic love (agape), (3) the tendency of lovers to engage in intrusive thinking about the beloved, (4) a concept of transcendence: the feeling that the union of two lovers results in something more meaningful than just the two lovers.

There was agreement across all cultures that love is a strong feeling and that lovers ultimately want to be together. Only altruism was considered more important in the United States than in Lithuania and Russia.

Several differences among individualism (US) and collectivism (Lithuania and Russia) occurred: Lithuanians and Russians resembled each other much more than either group resembles Americans. Russians and Lithuanians perceived love as an unreal fairy tale and expect it at some point either to come to an end or to transfer to a more real and enduring relationship that lacks the initial excitement of romantic love. Only then, they believed, “real” love and friendship set in. In the United States, participants perceived romantic love as more realistic and less illusionary. Americans (in contrast with Lithuanians and Russians) also included friendship in romantic love.

Lithuanians and Russians fall in love much more quickly than Americans. The study found that 90% of Lithuanians reported that they fell in love within a month or less, whereas 58% of Americans fell in love within a time frame of two months to a year (de Munck, Korotayev, de Munck, & Khaltourina, 2011). Other data is worthwhile to note in this context. When Sprecher and her colleagues (1994) asked people of different nationalities whether they were currently in love, Russians were the people who were found to be most in love (67%), Americans were in the middle (58%), and the Japanese were the least likely to be in love (52%).

Cross-cultural differences appear also in the experience of love progression over the years. Ingersoll-Dayton, Campbell, Kurokawa, and Saito (1996) compared how marriages develop over the long term in the United States versus Japan. They found that in the United States marriages start out with a relatively high level of intimacy and the respective partners try to keep the intimacy of the relationship while maintaining a separate identity. Japanese marriages, on the other hand, are at first characterized by many obligations that

the married couple has to the other people in their social relationships. The intimacy develops later in life when other close family members, to whom the couple had obligations, die and when the husband becomes more willing to share affection with the wife.

### **Emotional investment**

Schmitt (2006) and his colleagues explored cross-culturally emotional investment as a dimension of love. This concept comprises a variety of the core features of love such as loving, affectionate, cuddlesome, compassionate, and passionate. So, practically the emotional investment likens emotional engagement in love, being high or low emotionally in love. To investigate the impact of culture on love in more detail, Schmitt with colleagues had 15,234 participants from 48 countries complete several psychological scales and also used data from other sources. They discovered that North American participants exhibited a higher level of emotional investment significantly higher than those in all other regions of the world, and East Asia had levels of emotional investment significantly lower than those of all other world regions. Tanzania, Hong Kong, and Japan were the countries with the lowest levels of emotional investment, whereas the United States, Slovenia, and Cyprus were the countries with the highest levels of emotional investment (Schmitt et al., 2009).

### **Expression of love**

Does a passionate and energetic Latin lover love more intensely than a quiet and reserved Nordic lover? Or do they just express their emotions differently? People can express their love explicitly or implicitly. The passionate words, kind tone of voice, smiley facial expression, and special gestures are explicit and direct ways of love expression to a romantic partner. Actions and doing something good to a partner are implicit and indirect ways of love expression. American culture, for example, stresses the importance of verbal expression of love to another, so Americans many times say to each other how they love. “I love you” – are so typical words for them which they use on daily basis.

Sometimes, however, people do not need to be straight in their expressions because some things can be implicitly interpreted and understood without words. In Filipino and Filipino American families, for example, the verbal expression of love is much more reserved for special occasions. They do not need to explicitly share their feelings for each other because it is known and understood. Perhaps Filipinos and Filipino Americans do not find it essential to express love in overt ways because it can be construed as excessive, showy, or too American (Nadal, 2012).

Instead they show their *Mahal* (Tagalog word for love) in indirect ways. They express their love indirectly, through doing. Romantic partners may reveal their love by sharing a laugh or listening to each other’s problems in nonjudgmental ways, or by working through hardships and keeping their promises to remain by each other’s sides. Then for Filipino, Filipino American, Chinese families (Nadal, 2012; Moore & Wei, 2012), and other families with similar cultural values, love is rather in actions. Sometimes one might have to look

more closely to notice it. Their love is not minimal or invisible, but instead, the love is omnipresent and understood, and there is no need to flaunt it.

## Conclusions

Love emotions are experienced by many people, in various historical periods, and in most cultures of the world. Yet, these feelings display diversity - cultures influence how people feel, think, and behave being in romantic love. Thus, love is universal, but still culturally specific.

Passionate love has existed throughout ages, yet, attitudes to passion and behaviors varied dramatically from one culture to another and from one temporal period to the next. In different times of history people interpreted love variously and embraced different attitudes toward romantic love; they ascribed different meanings to the concept of love and related words, feelings, and behaviors. The cases of Chinese and European history provide evident examples of diversity of love attitudes in historical perspective.

Passionate love is an anthropological universal and its features primarily relate to evolutionary basics of mate selection that was important for people's survival. Yet, romance is culture-specific and based on historical and cultural traditions. Culture is a major factor that transforms passionate love into romantic love. Cultural values and traditional behaviors influence the expressions and experiences of love and transfer passionate love as primarily based on a sexual attraction into romantic love as an idealized and culturally affected way of loving. Culturally influenced features are ones that pertain to cultural rituals of love and mating. Thus the cultural perspective is as much powerful as evolutionary heritage in understanding of love.

Evolutionary psychology and neuroscience explain why passionate love is universal and equally intense in different cultures, while cultural influence demonstrates how romantic love is expressed in multiple cultural forms.

The research findings indicate that universal features primarily relate to love experience, while culturally influenced features are ones that pertain to the expressions of love: cultural rituals of love. The experience of being in love is colored by one's cultural values and the society to which one belongs.

People express their love explicitly and implicitly. Some cultures place emphasis on explicit and direct ways of love expression to a romantic partner, while others on implicit and indirect ways.

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### **About the Author**

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He taught many years in Russia and was visiting professor at the universities in Norway, Germany, Sweden, the UK and the USA. He presented his work related to international issues in psychology education and romantic love at several international conferences. He was co-editor and author of *Teaching Psychology around the World*, published in 3 volumes (2007, 2009, 2012). He convened the symposium on *Romantic Love and Culture* at the 22d International Congress of Cross-Cultural Psychology in Reims, France, in 2014.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the concept of romantic love? How is it related to passionate love, platonic love and sexual love? How is it different?
2. Did romantic love exist in all times and countries around the world in the history? How approach to love was different in various historical periods?
3. Is romantic love universal in modern era? Is it present in all cultures across the world?
4. What are similarities and differences in romantic love experience in different cultures? What cultural factors affect such experience?
5. Do people express their love the same way across the world?
6. What are explicit and implicit expressions of love?
7. Is modern love still romantic? What evidence does support your statement?
8. What changes do you expect in the nature of romantic love in the future? What will remain the same?

### Further Readings

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### Videos

- *The brain in love*; Helen Fisher's TED talk [http://www.ted.com/talks/helen\\_fisher\\_studies\\_the\\_brain\\_in\\_love?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_studies_the_brain_in_love?language=en)  
Why do we crave love so much, even to the point that we would die for it? To learn more about our very real, very physical need for romantic love, Helen Fisher and her research team took MRIs of people in love — and people who had just been dumped.

- *Lust or love:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUTdLJxDr-E>  
*Anthropologist* Helen Fisher discusses how to distinguish the desire for love or lust, how informative the men's appearance can be about their lifestyle and desires.
- *Attraction and mate selection:* <http://clipsforclass.com/sexuality>  
This video clip discusses social and sexual attraction and the various ways humans select mates. Dr. David Buss discusses the evolutionary perspective and sex differences. Dr. Alice Eagly has a social-structural theory focus and believes our social role affects our mate choice.