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THE SOCIOLOGY OF LOVE, COURTSHIP, AND DATING

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The question of “What is love?” has piqued curiosity and engendered frustration for much of history. The exasperated answer that you “just know” when you are in love is reflected in the body of sociological literature on the phenomenon. Sociologists do not seem to agree on a uniform definition, although there are several competing but complementary typologies that attempt to pin down those emotional and behavioral states that add up to romantic “love.”

Love scholarship can be roughly divided into two philosophical camps: (1) that which argues love must have certain components to be genuine, for instance, to differentiate it from mere liking or lust, and (2) that which suggests that love is a publicly informed but privately experienced state that is whatever the person “in love” believes it to be. Research on romantic love attachments often addresses the behaviors used in dating or, more infrequently, courtship; however, not all research on dating and courtship specifically addresses love. In this chapter, I will treat the three topics as separate. This is a conceit; clarity may be improved by separating the threads of romantic entanglement, but in research, as in life, the division is nowhere near as neatly accomplished.

It should also be mentioned here that the experience of love as understood in modern Western society has not been shared by all cultures in all times. In ancient Greece, true love between equals was seen as possible only between two men; although men married for purposes of procreation, a close emotional bond with a woman was seen as undesirable (Hendrick and Hendrick 1992). Romantic love

as featured in novels and film began in the twelfth century. At this time, love came to be understood as an intense and passionate relationship that made the lover somehow a better person and was thus a worthy pursuit, albeit one with elaborate rules and rituals that required time and resources (Singer 1984). The ability to participate was associated with aristocrats or members of the “court,” and it is this circumstance that gives us the term *courtship*.

Still, the expectation that one would love one’s spouse was many years in coming. According to Stone (1980), changes in economic production and labor markets, together with public health measures, helped to encourage young persons to marry for love. Families had less sway over the choices of young people as production moved away from the family and into the factory, and as life expectancy increased, so did the emotional investment a spouse was willing to make in his or her partner. In some cultures where partners are still chosen by a young person’s family, love is still not seen as a requisite for marriage. In this view, romantic love is a poor basis for forming a lasting union—and this normative stance is evident in research on spousal choice and sentiment. In one study (Levine et al. 1995), researchers asked participants in 10 countries whether they would marry a person who had the traits that they hoped for in a spouse, but whom they did not love. In the United States, fewer than 5 percent of people said that they would make such a match, while in nations such as Pakistan and Japan, young people were much more likely to consider such a union (50.4 and 35.7 percent, respectively). In nations where familism takes

precedence over individual goals and desires, love and marriage are not always experienced together. Should love develop between the two, so much the better—but if not, the marriage is based on a solidly practical foundation designed to maintain familial and community stability.

WHAT IS AND IS (PERHAPS) NOT LOVE

With such an elusive topic, it is perhaps not surprising that many scholars who study love resort to metaphors to try to explain what love is. The rich and varied collection of metaphors include love as a “story” that we tell ourselves and one another (Sternberg 1998), expressions of love as policy statements that set forth the terms and expectations of the relationship (Van de Vate 1981), love as intensely focused and sustained attention in another person (see Brown 1987; Rowntree 1989), and love as emotion via decision (Hatfield and Rapson 1987).

Many scholars differentiate between the “falling in love” state of early romantic attachment and the more companionate state of being in a love relationship after the original flush has worn off (see Hendrick and Hendrick 1992). The intensity of early love is impossible for most couples to maintain. As the relationship progresses, partners come to have a warmer and closer feeling of intimacy, termed *companionate love*, rather than the all-encompassing passion experienced when the relationship was new (Berscheid and Walster 1978).

Dorothy Tennov’s (1979) work on “limerence” is perhaps the most systematic exploration of the difference between falling in love and being in a committed love relationship. According to Tennov, limerence is a transient state that involves preoccupation with the “limerent object” (i.e., the person one is falling for) together with idealization, mood swings, and physiological arousal. Limerence may be positive, that is, mutual, or negative/unrequited. Much of limerence occurs in the mind of the one experiencing the emotion. Most people will become limerent at some point in their lives. The experience is generally not permanent—a limerent state lasts an average of around two years—but may occur more than once in a lifetime. What some people experience as a loss of passion, to Tennov, is the waning of the limerent state.

LOVE TYPOLOGIES AND THEORIES

Other research suggests that love is what the lover defines it to be. Lee’s (1973) famous typology of “love styles” identifies six basic types of love experience; not all of the styles of love fit widespread cultural definitions of how romantic love develops and progresses. The primary styles of *eros*, *ludus*, and *storge* and the secondary styles of *mania*, *pragma*, and *agape* reflect different beliefs regarding love and loving behavior as well as personal preferences and comfort levels. The style that most closely

resembles ideals of romantic love is termed *eros*. Lovers who have the *eros* style tend to value sexual and sensual contact with the beloved, to have a well-formed image of the beloved or a “type” that they tend to be drawn to, to become sexual fairly quickly in a relationship, to define the experience as “love” quite quickly, and to feel that the experience of the relationship is of great importance and scope. By contrast, lovers with styles of *ludus*, *storge*, *mania*, *pragma*, and *agape* do not fit the stereotypical mold of romantic love presented in novels and film, although manic lovers fit negative stereotypes of obsessed love. Ludus-style lovers are most interested in the conquest possible when chasing a potential partner. Love, to the ludus lover, is a game of strategy. These lovers are more likely to be pursuing multiple partners and to attempt to limit emotional displays with a partner or potential partner in an effort to maintain an advantage in the dyad. Sexual contact may be more likely to have an aspect of accomplishment and play in these pairings. Storge-style lovers, by contrast, focus on comfort and emotional closeness in a relationship. A relationship between partners with storge style of loving is generally not very physical and passion is not of paramount importance. To outsiders who equate the intense and exquisite experience of limerence as love, storge lovers can seem more like close friends. This is not altogether incorrect, as deep friendship is the basis of this form of love. Lovers who tend toward the *pragma* style are practical and stress what the potential partner brings to the bargaining table. These lovers are seeking to make the best deal for future life circumstances as possible. Manic love, on the other hand, is not reasoned. This form of love is love for love’s sake; manic lovers value love to the point of obsession and experience an emotional roller coaster of jealousy, insecurity, and elation. The manic lover does not allow the relationship to develop over time but instead attempts to force the partner to make a declaration of love and intention. If ludic lovers enjoy the experience and have fun with love, manic lovers, for all that they yearn for love, generally feel miserable while in a relationship. The final style in Lee’s typology, *agape*, is very rare in romantic love. This form of love is selfless and based on an almost spiritual desire for the other’s good. Generally, this type of love is considered an ideal.

Sternberg (1998) also suggests an individual and subjective approach to the experience of love. Sternberg’s work shows how lovers story their experiences; the resulting catalogue of love “stories” shows how individuals draw on shared understandings of what love is to fashion coherent and yet individual accounts of the love experience. Some love stories identified by Sternberg include love as science, love as journey, love as art, and love as war.

Most couples who profess a permanent bond (whether in a marriage or other commitment ceremony) describe their partnership as strong and explain that they have great love for their partner. But, over time, evaluations shift. Some couples lose the intense feeling of love and closeness, while

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other couples experience what can be termed *global adoration*, which seems to increase marital satisfaction and stability (Neff and Karney 2005:480).

The closeness experienced by partners determines the form of love experienced according to Sternberg (1986). Sternberg's well-known triangle theory of love suggests that love is a triangle with three points, each formed by a component of love: intimacy (i.e., emotional investment and closeness), passion (excitement and arousal, both emotional and physical), and commitment (a decision to maintain the relationship over time). A love relationship may be stronger in one or two areas and thus have a different character than would another relationship that features a different combination of attributes. For instance, infatuated love features great passion but lacks both intimacy and commitment, fatuous love includes passion and commitment without intimacy, and consummate love completes the triangle with all three components present.

COURTSHIP

Love and courtship are associated in Reiss's (1960, 1980) wheel theory of love. Unlike Sternberg's triangle theory, wheel theory assumes a standard progression of romantic relationships that encourages love to develop during the courtship process. These stages are sequential, each successful completion leading to the next step in the courtship process. First, couples experience *rapport*, or a feeling of ease with one another. Often, this is the result of shared attitudes and backgrounds, which encourages homogamy (or the tendency of people to marry others who are similar to themselves in background and experience). When a couple has *rapport*, communication is easier and the next stage of *self-revelation* is facilitated. In this stage, each partner exposes "who I am" to the other; within the norms of their social class and culture, partners will reveal information about themselves to the other, which helps to build closeness. As partners learn more and more about one another and begin to feel closer, the sentiment of *mutual dependency* grows. In this stage, each partner begins to rely on the other and feel as part of an interdependent unit. If this stage is fully experienced, and the relationship continued, the partners will take on unique significance for one another. One doesn't merely have "a girlfriend" who could be easily replaced by another female of similar background and attractiveness. This person brings unique benefits not easily found with others and thus *this* person has special status. If the couple completes the final stage of *intimacy need fulfillment*, by each partner deciding that the relationship fits his or her needs for closeness and disclosure, the relationship will likely result in an official partnering.

Another metaphor for partner choice during courtship is a "filter." Alan Kerckhoff and K. E. Davis (1962) posited a filter theory of partner choice based on couples successfully passing through a series of filters, including social characteristics, similarity of values, and need complementarity.

At each stage, potential partners who are not acceptable are excluded from further consideration. Murstein (1970) refined this theory with his stimulus-value-role (SVR) model of partner selection. In brief, partners progress from the stimulus stage, where social similarity and physical attractiveness first catch one's attention, through the stage of value where partners compare attitudes and beliefs on a variety of issues to check for fit and compatibility, and finally to role, to see if the potential partner fits with the idealized expectations that each has for a potential mate. Interestingly, Murstein notes that while physical attraction is very important for the initiation of a partnership, people generally choose partners whose attractiveness is similar to their own rather than seeking to find the most physically impressive partner possible.

Generally, courtship differs from dating in that it is more structured and subject to cultural norms. Courtship, unlike the looser dating, is acknowledged as codified behavior designed to lead to a permanent partnership or marriage (Cere 2001). Some researchers who detail courtship norms and patterns suggest that the erosion of courting behavior in Western societies in the twentieth century, while not solely determinant, corresponds to a lack of preparation for marriage and the attendant rise in rates of divorce (see Kass and Kass 1999).

Theories of Courtship

Courtship as a field of inquiry in modern sociology has been called "virtually moribund" (Glenn, cited in Cere 2001). Few academics in family sociology now study the more traditional pathways that young adults take to marriage. According to Cere (2001), studies of courtship are now found within three general schools of inquiry: sociobiology, exchange theory, and close-relationship theory (p. 55).

Willard Waller (1937) was one of the first sociologists to note that the marriage contract was based on a bargain that was becoming less and less explicit. In Waller's view, couples placed greater stress on love as a basis for marriage because of the lack of understanding of agreed-on and culturally sanctioned bases for marriage.

Courtship, then, stopped being a proving ground for potential partners to check one another for fitness as mate. Beth Bailey (1988) detailed the evolution of courtship from a private enactment of cultural expectation to a more public and also more sexually intimate "dating" brought about by market courtship. Courting moved from the home environment of family, church, and culture to the paid arena of dating sites such as restaurants, movies, and clubs. Courtship, beginning to morph into dating, became something to be purchased rather than something to be performed.

Gary Becker (1974) suggested the now well-known exchange theory model of courtship. In brief, people marry when the perceived benefits of a given pair bond outweigh the perceived costs of the bond. Each party is aware of

what preferences or characteristics they require, and what resources, or attributes they have to offer another are part of the deal they wish to strike. From this perspective, courtship is akin to a long interview in which each party attempts to broker the best deal possible given the resources they may possess. However, this theory is criticized for its inability to account for the great persuasive and compelling nature of “love” and the desire to form a permanent bond with a partner who, to an outsider, might seem like a very poor choice. Exchange theory requires that each party be a rational actor with sufficient insight into their own and their partner’s motivations and qualities to be able to evaluate and strike the desired bargain.

Sociobiological theories of courtship focus on partners’ selection of a mate who will provide maximum reproductive success. Stated broadly, men seek out women who show physical signs of fertility (i.e., youth, attractiveness, and the appearance of health), while women are more likely to seek a partner who is able and willing to support a family (see Buss 1988; Tooke and Camire 1991; Benz, Anderson, and Miller 1995).

Courtship also has a retrospective character. Couples spending time together generally define their activity as dating; after the pair has become engaged or has married, the period of dating becomes the courtship that led to the decision to permanently partner. Courtship as experienced and referenced, then, is increasingly the province of memory and redefinition and is produced and reproduced in family storytelling occasions. Ponzetti (2005) identifies courtship tales as a major theme in family storytelling and explains that the courtship story serves as a ready explanation of how the pair decided to marry, thus chronicling the beginning of a family unit. By cofashioning the tale of courtship, spouses can fashion a partnership history that may help them to transcend present difficulties.

DATING

While the term *courtship* generally refers to mate selection leading to long-term partnership, *dating* has a much more casual connotation. Dating behavior as studied by sociologists runs the gamut from the very casual “hanging out” that isn’t “really dating” (Owens 2005) to spending time with one or more potential partners, to having fun without any expectation of permanence. Dating can be difficult to distinguish from friendship at times, especially among young adults and teens who spend unstructured time hanging out with one another but who do not necessarily seek to define their relationships and who may deny that they have been on a “date.” In some instances, young adults form committed sexual and emotional relationships that are durable, although they do not necessarily have an expectation of permanence while reporting that they have “never dated” or “never been on a date” (Owens 2005).

The difference in goals present in dating and courtship gives a “two-tiered system of heterosexual interaction” to

modern romance (Cate and Lloyd 1992:24). In fact, the goal and seriousness of the relationship is often the basis for marking whether the couple is “dating” or “courting,” with dating evolving into courtship when the couple becomes both serious and sexually exclusive. Homogamy is present among dating, cohabiting, and married couples and forms an aspect of partner selection at all levels of commitment, but there does seem to be a “winnowing process” whereby the requirements and expectations of a partner become more and more stringent as the relationship moves from mere dating to a more permanent partnership (Blackwell and Lichter 2004:719).

Studies of the early stages of partner choice in dating tend to focus on initial attraction (Buss et al. 2001) and the techniques that people use to draw partners to them (see Clark, Shaver, and Abrahams 1999). Frequently, this literature deals with the ideal or goal relationship that a partner holds going into a potential relationship. Studies of the early stages of a dating relationship, therefore, often gauge the predating expectations or desires of partners. An example would be Yancey’s (2002) study of who interracially dates; factors such as religious background, political stance, residential region, and educational background influence whether a person will date outside their own racial or ethnic background.

Relationship Troubles

Dating troubles are also a popular avenue for inquiry. Dating involves a plethora of potential difficulties, including dishonesty, infidelity, emotional turmoil, miscommunication, and struggles over power and dominance. Deception, therefore, is part of the mating dance. Both men and women understand that a potential partner will likely hide or minimize negative attributes and highlight other characteristics that would make him or her more attractive in the dating arena. In heterosexual pairings, deception follows gendered norms of what is and is not attractive in a potential spouse. As previously noted, men place a higher premium on youth when considering potential partners, while women are more likely to stress ability to support a family. Interestingly, each sex understands that the other is trying to appeal to these norms. Men acknowledge that women are going to be deceptive about intentions to maintain a youthful and attractive appearance, while women and men agree that men are more likely to be deceptive about financial prospects for the future (Benz et al. 1995).

Couples deceive one another not only to attract a partner who might otherwise not be interested but also to hide “competing relationships” or “outside-relationship activities,” and to gloss over the “state of the relationship,” including decreasing of contact (Tolhuizen 1991, cited in Cate and Lloyd 1992:87). Whether a partner chooses to stay or leave after discovering deception is influenced by communication patterns and the person’s style of attachment (Jang, Smith, and Levine 2002).

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Deception is not the only serious complication that couples face. More direct forms of aggression in relationships also exist. Intimate partner violence began receiving widespread attention in the 1980s. Although earlier studies may have made brief mention of violence in intimate relationships, it was not until the 1980s that explicit acknowledgement was offered that sexual assault and other forms of violence occurred in courtship and dating (Cate and Lloyd 1992). This oversight is surprising, as physical violence occurs in as many as 40 percent of dating couples (Simons, Lin, and Gordon 1998). Both male and female partners report experiencing common couple violence such as pushing or slapping, but men are more likely than women to engage in serious violence against a partner (Johnson and Ferraro 2000). Lifetime chances of being the victim of intimate partner violence are also skewed by gender. About a quarter of women but fewer than 10 percent of men will be physically assaulted by an intimate partner (see Tjaden and Thoennes 1998).

RECENT TRENDS IN SCHOLARSHIP ON ROMANTIC PAIRINGS

Much of the sociological literature on romantic pairings prior to 1970 focused on homogamy, propinquity, and complementarity of roles among young heterosexual couples. In more recent decades, researchers have included homosexual couples in studies of love, dating, and partnering (for a notable example, see Vaughan 1986). Moreover, studies of dating and courtship now include older daters, who may or may not have children from previous unions or who may be grieving the loss of a spouse due to divorce or widowhood (see Huyck 2001; Dickson, Hughes, and Walker 2005). Among adults in later life, dating relationships follow traditional gender norms (McElhany 1992) and provide a great deal of personal satisfaction and emotional closeness whether or not the relationship leads to marriage (Bulcroft and O'Conner 1986). Still, seniors who date experience some drawbacks unique to their life circumstances. Older women in the dating market feel vulnerable to being taken advantage of financially and practically in what Dickson et al. (2005) term the "nurse and purse phenomenon" (p. 78).

Work in this field evolves as people find new and innovative ways to relate to one another sexually and romantically. At present, two subfields are emerging as very important to the study of romantic pairings: work on love relationships that involve distance, such as cyber-romance or "living apart together" (LAT) relationships (Levin 2004), and on the liminal and open-ended pairings usually, but not exclusively, experienced by young adults and which have been termed *friends-with-benefits* relationships (Hughes, Morrison, and Asada 2005).

The more well-known of the two areas of inquiry is an exploration of what in the past was combined into the notion of "long-distance relationships." These relationships

have exploded with the advent of the Internet; it is now possible to meet partners, disclose personal information in real time through messaging, and even be physically intimate virtually. Online relationship research is a burgeoning field that includes work on Internet personals as a way to meet potential partners (see Groom and Pennebaker 2005), online chat as a gateway to potential real-world infidelity (Mileham 2003), online intimacy as a form of sexual exchange (Waskul 2002), and e-mail messaging (Hovick, Meyers, and Timmerman 2003) as a means of relationship maintenance.

The LAT relationship is a "historically new family form" that developed due to changing norms and societal circumstances over the past 30 years (Levin 2004). Partners in LAT relationships view themselves as a committed couple and their social network shares this image, but the partners maintain separate residences—sometimes hours away from one another—due to work or familial obligations or even personal preference. These relationships are distinguished from commuter marriages or relationships in that the pair does not share a primary home part-time, with one partner also renting an apartment during work or school.

A very recent trend in relationship research involves the friends-with-benefits relationship (FWBR) that involves sexual intimacy but not necessarily an explicitly emotional romantic connection as "romance" is traditionally understood. These pairings may or may not involve expectations by partners that the relationship will evolve into something more emotionally intimate (Hughes et al. 2005). These relationships combine the benefits of a friendship with that of a sexual relationship, but without the responsibility and time constraints present in more traditional romantic relationships.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Research on love, courtship, and dating will continue to evolve as new modes of pairing up and maintaining emotional closeness become more accessible. It is likely that electronic modes of relating will receive more attention from scholars. Not only has the Internet reduced much of the stigma of placing the "personals ad," but early stages of courting and relating can now be conducted with little—or no—in-person contact. Obviously, such circumstances come with attendant complications: How does one establish rapport and trust without the many cues in-person contact allows? What are the effects of distanced relating on disclosure and truth telling? Do these pairings become sexual more quickly because of a heightened sense of intimacy and "knowingness"? Extrareationship pairings via electronic media will also continue to garner increased attention, as the definition of what "counts" as cheating moves further from a physical-contact model to a more flexible conceptualization of contact that takes attention, time, and focus from the primary relationship.

Studies of relational power and earnings will also factor strongly in family scholarship in the coming decades. Women have always worked, as family scholars who detail the historical family unit of production have noted. However, if current trends continue, women will be the majority of college graduates and may begin to catch up to men in their professional accomplishments and dollar earnings. This transition, if it occurs, will not be a simple one as it will challenge long-held notions of gender and place within a heterosexual pair bond.

Taking into account both electronic modes of relating and economic pressures felt by couples, we can also expect to see more scholarship on distance relationships and commuting. Established couples may choose to live apart due to career or educational necessity. Electronic communications and other forms of technology (e.g., cellular telephones that can be used to call one another or to send photos or text messages) may be used to maintain emotional closeness despite geographic distance.