

101. Hatfield, E. and Rapson, R. L. (in press). Love. In David Sander & Klaus Scherer (Eds.) *Oxford companion to the affective sciences*. (pp. 243-245). New York: Oxford University Press.

Love

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Definitions of Love

In all cultures, people seem to distinguish between passionate love and companionate love. Passionate love (sometimes called “obsessive love,” “infatuation,” “lovesickness,” or “being in love,”) is a powerful emotional state. It is defined as “a state of intense longing for union with the other. . .” and may be associated with a confusion of feelings: elation and pain, tenderness and sexuality, anxiety and relief, altruism and jealousy. Companionate love is a far less intense emotion. It has been defined as “the affection and tenderness we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined,” and is characterized by affection, commitment, intimacy, and a concern for the welfare of others (Hatfield and Rapson, 1993).

Researchers have proffered other, more fine grained, definitions and typologies of love (Fisher, 2004; Frijda, 2006; Sternberg, 1998) but for purposes of this paper we will concentrate on love (in general) and on passionate and companionate love.

In recent years, social psychologists have attempted to understand the cultural, cognitive, cultural, emotional, neurohormonal, and evolutionary processes that give love its distinct emotional flavor (Aron & Aron, 1986; Buss, 1994; Fisher, 2004; Frijda, 2006; Hatfield and Rapson, 2005).

A. Anthropological and evolutionary perspectives

Anthropologists and historians generally agree that passionate and companionate love are “cultural universals”—existing in all cultures and during all historical eras. Cultural psychologists point out, however, that culture is an important determinant as to whether the culture idealizes love or depicts it as sinful, how passionately young people love, whether they confess feelings of love to family and friends, whether love is assumed to be a precursor to marriage (or if marriages are arranged), and how long love lasts (Hatfield, Rapson, and Martel, 2007; Jankowiak, 1995).

Since Darwin, of course, evolutionary psychologists have argued that love and sexual selection are of critical importance in shaping the evolution of man and animals. Today, evolutionary psychologists argue that passionate and companionate love evolved to solve different problems in pair-bonding. Passionate love—which is associated with romantic *attraction*—is designed to assist lovers in identifying (and selecting) suitable candidates for mating and in motivating them to attempt to attract the other’s interest, and to attempt to solidify the relationship. Companionate love—which is associated with attachment, intimacy, trust, and caring—is designed assist couples in maintaining close relationships over time (Buss, 1994; Fisher, 2004)—at least long enough so that children can be nurtured until they are old enough to survive on their own.

B. Genetic and biological perspectives

Recently, social psychologists, neuroscientists, and physiologists have begun to explore the links between love, sexual desire, and sexual behavior.

Bartels and Zeki (2000, 2004), for example, studied the neural bases of passionate love using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) techniques. They interviewed young men and women from 11 countries who claimed to be “truly, deeply, and madly” in love. They discovered that passionate love leads to increased activity in the areas of the brain associated with euphoria and reward and decreased levels of activity in the areas associated with distress and depression.

Scientists interested in the chemistry of passionate love have found that a variety of neurochemicals spark passionate love and sexual desire. Fisher (2004), for example, found that passionate love is associated with the natural stimulant dopamine (and perhaps norepinephrine and serotonin.) Lust is associated primarily with the hormone testosterone. (Estrogen may decrease desire.) Attachment is produced primarily by the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin (Fisher, 2004; Regan and Berscheid, 1999).

Psychologists’ opinions may differ on whether romantic and passionate love are emotions (Fisher, 2004; Hatfield, Rapson, and Martel, 2007; Regan and Berscheid, 1999) and whether passionate love, sexual desire, and sexual motivation are closely related constructs (both neurobiologically or physiologically) or very different in their nature (Bartels, 2000, 2004; Diamond, 2003; Fisher, 2004; Hatfield and Rapson, 1993). Nonetheless, this pathbreaking research has the potential to answer age-old questions as to the nature of culture, love, and human sexuality.

C. Love: how long does it last?

When asked: “How long does love last?” most social psychologists would counter with: “What kind of love?” According to most theorists, the passage of time has a very different impact on passionate versus companionate love. In

general, passionate love is assumed to decline fairly quickly, while companionate love is assumed to remain fairly stable (or actually increase) over time.

Social psychologists have interviewed dating couples, newlyweds, and older couples (ranging in age from 18-82), who have been dating or married varying lengths of time. They asked about couples' love for their partners and the extent to which their partners returned their love. Scholars find that time *does* have a corrosive effect on love—but that effect is equally strong for passionate *and* companionate love. Both forms of love tend to decline slightly, and equally, over time. How do scholars interpret this surprising finding? One can draw an optimistic conclusion or a pessimistic one. On the positive side, even after several years of marriage, men and women were still reporting high levels of both passionate and companionate love. Contrary to what is often portrayed by the mass media, older persons, married for several years, can still experience passionate and companionate love in their relationships. However, if one wants to interpret the results pessimistically, one can point to the fact that time tended to produce a deterioration in both kinds of love.

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