

Gender Differences in Love and Intimacy: The Fantasy vs. the Reality

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SUMMARY. Are there gender differences in the ability to love? Social psychological data suggest that men and women are more similar than the stereotypes say they are. Yet, there are some differences in men's and women's ability and motivation to love. Both seem equally susceptible to falling passionately in love. However, traditional women seem to be slightly more comfortable in intimate encounters than are men. Traditional men are slightly more comfortable taking independent action. A new androgynous breed of men and women may be appearing, which is comfortable with both.

In 1985, Ann Landers sparked a nationwide debate by asking readers: "Would you be content to be held close and treated tenderly and forget about 'the act'?" More than 90,000 women cast their ballots—72% preferred affection to sex. Humorists responded by conducting their own polls among *men*. Art Buchwald observed that, in his bachelor days, he met all 62,000 women who preferred cuddling to sex. Mike Royko asked men: "Which do you prefer: Sex or bowling?" (Observed one respondent, Pat, of St. Louis: "I mentioned to my wife that I had to put down whether I preferred sex with her or sinking a 40-foot birdie putt. She told me the odds of either happening in the near future were about the same.")

The question as to whether or not there are gender differences in the ability to love has long fascinated scientists and laypeople. In

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general, the data suggest that men and women are more similar than the stereotypes say they are; almost everyone, male or female, longs to be passionately in love *and* to have a stable, companionate, intimate relationship. Yet, there are some slight differences in men's and women's ability and motivation to love. Both seem equally susceptible to falling *passionately* in love. However, in general, traditional women seem to be slightly more comfortable in intimate encounters than are men; traditional men are slightly more comfortable taking independent action. A new, androgynous breed of men and women may be appearing, which is comfortable with both. Let us review, briefly, the research that leads us to these conclusions. (For a more comprehensive review of this research, see Hatfield, 1983 or Peplau, 1983.)

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PASSIONATE LOVE

Hatfield and Walster (1981, p. 9) define passionate love as:

A state of intense longing for union with another. Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy. Unrequited love (separation) with emptiness; with anxiety or despair. A state of profound physiological arousal.

Traditionally, passionate love is the sine qua non of a serious relationship (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). When asked "Do you think a person should ever marry one whom he or she does not love?" 82% of men and 80% of women say "No" (Burgess, Wallin & Schultz, 1953).

Hatfield and Sprecher (1985) developed a 15-item scale that measures the intensity of men and women's passionate feelings. It includes such items as: "Sometimes I can't control my thoughts; they are obsessively on _____"; "I possess a powerful attraction for _____"; "I would feel deep despair if _____ left me"; "I want _____—physically, emotionally, mentally"; "I eagerly look for signs indicating _____'s desire for me."

A number of studies make it clear that almost everyone is capable of loving passionately. Passionate lovers are in love with a daydream. It is easy to love someone who you believe is all perfect and who could fulfill all your desires, if only he/she chose. The evidence suggests that men and women of all ages, of varying intellec-

tual capacities, mentally ill or healthy, are capable of loving a day-dream. (See Easton, 1985; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981.) To love a real person is much harder.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMPANIONATE LOVE/INTIMACY

Hatfield and Walster (1978, p. 9) define *companionate* love as: "The affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined." Rubin (1970) developed a 13-item *Love* scale that measures a variety of elements associated with love — idealization of the loved one, intimacy, the desire to share emotions and experiences, sexual attraction, the exclusive and absorptive nature of the relationship, and, finally, the couple's relative lack of concern with social norms and constraints.

Hatfield (1984, p. 208) defines *intimacy* as "A process by which people attempt to get close to another; to explore similarities and differences in the ways they both think, feel, and behave." Intimate relationships have a number of characteristics: *Cognitive* — Intimates are willing to reveal themselves to one another. *Emotional* — Intimates care deeply about one another. *Behavioral* — Intimates are comfortable in close physical proximity. They gaze at one another (Argyle, 1972), lean on one another (Hatfield, Roberts & Schmidt, 1980), stand close to one another (Allgeier & Byrne, 1973), and perhaps touch.

For most people, intimate relationships are the most important thing in their lives (see Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Brehm, 1985; or Duck & Gilmour, 1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1982.) Both Schaefer and Olson (1981) and Miller and Lefcourt (1982) have developed scales designed to measure intimacy. The Schaefer/Olson PAIR inventory is a 36-item scale that measure how close men and women are to one another in five areas — emotional, social, intellectual, sexual, and recreational. The Miller MSIS is a 17-item scale that measures intimacy in both friendships and in marital relationships.

THEORISTS AGREE

Aristotle (Ostwald, 1962) argued that, by nature, men are superior in every respect to women. "Ergo," Aristotle argued, "because the wife is inferior to her husband, she ought to love him more than he her; algebraically, this would compensate for their inequality and

result in a well-balanced relationship." Interestingly enough, modern feminists have tended to agree with Aristotle—they too view women as the more loving of the two sexes. Dinnerstein (1977, p. 70) observes:

It has often been pointed out that women depend lopsidedly on love for emotional fulfillment because they are barred from absorbing activity in the public domain. This is true. But it is also true that men can depend lopsidedly on participation in the public domain because they are stymied by love.

Of course, there are many men and women who possess equal facility in intimate encounters. But, in love relationships, even slight variations can make a profound difference in a couple's happiness. Evidence in support of this proposition comes from a wide array of sources.

Traupmann and Hatfield (1981) asked dating, newlywed, and older couples how *companionately* they loved their partners and how much they thought they were loved in return. They found that, from the dating period until very late in life, women seemed to love their partners more than they were loved in return. Only in the final years of life do men and women come to love and respect one another equally.

We suspect that research will show women to be more intimate than men, for the reasons we will soon cite, but, as yet, there is no direct evidence in favor of this proposition. (See Easton, 1985, for a review of the sparse research that does exist.)

What Leads Us to Such a Conclusion?

1. *Society seems to encourage women to be intimacy experts, men to be experts in maintaining their independence.* Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson and Rosenkrantz (1972) asked mental health professionals (psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and psychiatric social workers) and men and women of widely varying ages, religions, and education to indicate what they thought the typical man and typical woman were like. People assessed that the typical man and the woman were, and ought to be, very different. Men are perceived to be rational, competent, independent, and assertive. They hide their emotions; they never cry, they are objective and direct, they are leaders, are ambitious, are not at all dependent.

Unfortunately, they are also branded insensitive and rough, not at all talkative, not aware of the feelings of others, not easily expressive of tender feelings. Women are perceived to be warm and expressive. They are talkative, tactful, gentle, aware of the feelings of others, and easily express tender feelings. Unfortunately they are also seen as illogical, emotional, noncompetitive, and submissive. Both men and women agree that men have many more admirable characteristics than do women.

2. *Women seem to know more about intimate relations than do men.* Dion and Dion (1979) find that men are more likely to endorse "romantic" beliefs—such as that true love lasts forever, comes but once, is strange and incomprehensible, and conquers barriers of custom or social class. Women are more likely to be "pragmatists" who say that we can each love many people, that economic security is as important as passion, and that some disillusionment usually accompanies long-term relationships.

3. *Women are more comfortable with intimate talk than are men.* Women disclose far more to others than do men. (See, e.g., Cozby, 1973.) Rubin, Hill, Peplau, and Dunke-Schetter (1980) point out that the basis for such differences appears to be in the traditional socialization practices we mentioned earlier. In our culture, women have been encouraged to show feelings; men have been taught to hide their feelings and to avoid displays of weakness. Millett (1975) observes, "Women express, men repress."

Women also receive more disclosures than do men. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the amount of information people reveal to others has an enormous impact on the amount of information they receive in return (see, e.g., Davis & Skinner, 1978.)

4. *Women are willing to sacrifice more for love than are men.* Psychologists have begun to study couples' implicit "marriage contracts"—men and women's unconscious understandings as to what sort of give-and-take is fair. Researchers have attempted to determine how fair men and women perceive their respective "contracts" to be (see Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne & Hay, 1984.) Researchers contacted dating, newlywed, and elderly couples who had been married for up to 60 years, and asked them how fair they thought their relationships were.

Couples in this series of studies were asked to focus on four possible areas of concern:

1. *Personal concerns:* How attractive were they and their partners? How sociable? Intelligent?
2. *Emotional concerns:* How much love did they express for one another? How much liking, understanding, and acceptance? How much sexual pleasure did they give and get? Were they faithful? How committed to one another? Did they respect their partners' needs for freedom?
3. *Day-to-day concerns:* How much of the day-to-day maintenance of the house did they and their partners do? How about finances? Companionability? Conversation? Decision making? Remembering special occasions? Did they fit in with one another's friends and relatives?
4. *Opportunities gained and lost:* How much did they gain simply from going together or being married? For example, how much did they appreciate the chance to be married? To be a parent or a grandparent? Having someone to grow old with? How about opportunities foregone?

After considering all these things, men and women were asked how fair they thought their relationships were. Researchers found that regardless of whether couples were dating, newlyweds, or long marrieds, both men and women agreed that the men were getting the best deal. Both agreed that, in general, men contribute less to a marriage than women do and get more out of it.

Bernard (1973) provides additional support for the notion that women sacrifice more for love than men do. In her review of the voluminous literature contrasting "his marriage *versus* her marriage," she observes a strange paradox. Women are more eager to marry than are men; yet women are the losers in marriage. She notes that "being married is about twice as advantageous to men as to women in terms of continued survival" (p. 27). As compared to single men, married men's mental health is far better, their happiness is greater, their earning power is greater, after middle age their health is better, and they live longer. The opposite is true for married as compared to single women. For example, all symptoms of psychological distress show up more frequently than expected among married women: nervous breakdowns, nervousness, inertia, insomnia, trembling or perspiring hands, nightmares, fainting, headaches, dizziness, and heart palpitations. They show up much less frequently than expected among unmarried women.

These data, then, suggest that, like it or not, women sacrifice the

most for love. Perhaps, for women, marriage should carry a warning label: "This relationship may be hazardous to your health."

WHY CAN'T A WOMAN BE MORE LIKE A MAN— OR VICE VERSA?

The fact that men and women may want different things in their most intimate of relationships—more freedom vs. increased intimacy—causes certain problems. A few people will be able to select mates whose desire for intimacy perfectly matches their own, but most of them will not. Many people marry before they have had enough experience to enable them to know what to look for in a mate. Others will know exactly what they want, but be unable to get it. (For example, there are more eligible women than men, and the discrepancy increases with age. See, e.g., Novak, 1983.) Many women will want far more love and intimacy than their partners are capable of providing. Many men will feel smothered by their mates; they will long for a little independence. Couples are forced to negotiate a level of intimacy that is bearable to both. In the words from "My Fair Lady," this may ensure that "neither gets what either really wants at all."

Therapists such as Napier (1977) have described the destructive spiral that such asymmetrical matches can take. He observes: Type I (usually a woman) is only minimally concerned about maintaining her independence. What she cares about is achieving emotional closeness. She seeks fusion with the partner, oneness, or "we-ness" in the marriage. She puts much energy into planning togetherness activities. Type I fears rejection and abandonment.

Type I's partner, Type II (usually a man) is most concerned with maintaining his sense of self and personal freedom and autonomy. He feels a strong need to establish his territory within the common household. To have my study, my workshop, my car. Similarly he fears being suffocated, stifled, or engulfed, or in some manner intruded on by his wife.

Napier observes that men and women's efforts to get close, but not too close, for each of them makes matters worse. Women (seeking more closeness) clasp their mates tightly, thereby contributing to the men's anxiety. The men (seeking more distance) retreat further, which increases their wives' panic, and induces further clasping. How can men and women escape from this destructive tug-of-war?

A PRESCRIPTION FOR INTIMACY

Most of us want and need a warm intimate relationship. At the same time, we must recognize that every social encounter contains risks (see Hatfield, 1984.) What, then, is the solution? Social psychological research and clinical experience give us some hints.

A basic theoretical assumption provides the framework we use in teaching couples how to be intimate with one another. People must be capable of independence in order to be intimate with others; capable of intimacy, if they are to be independent. Independence and intimacy are not incompatible personality traits, but interlocking skills. People who lack the ability to be independent *and* intimate can never really be either. According to theorists, one of the most primitive tasks people face is to learn how to maintain their own identity and integrity while engaging in deeply intimate relationships with others. (For a fuller discussion of this point see, e.g., Kaplan, 1978; Pope, 1980.) Therapists have developed a variety of techniques for teaching couples to be more intimate.

DEVELOPING INTIMACY SKILLS

Encouraging People to Accept Themselves as They Are

It is a great temptation to demand perfection of oneself. Many people are determined not to settle for less. Real life, of course, is lived in the middle zone. Real people inevitably have some strengths *and* some quirks. The trick to enjoying relationships is to learn to take pleasure in diversity. The first step in learning to be independent/intimate, then, is to come to accept the fact that you are entitled to be what you are — to have the ideas you have, the feelings you feel, to do the best that you can do. And that must be good enough.

In therapy, we try to move people from the notion that one should come into the world perfect, and continue that way, to a realization that one can only gain wisdom in small steps. People must pick small goals and work to accomplish them one at a time. That way change is manageable, possible.

Encouraging People to Recognize Their Intimates for What They Are — and Let Them Be

People may be hard on themselves, but they are generally even harder on their partners. Most people have the idea that everyone is

entitled to a perfect partner, or at least one a little better than the one available. If people are going to have an intimate relationship, they have to learn to enjoy others as they are, without hoping to fix them up.

From one's own point of view, it seems so clear that things would be far better if one's mate were only the person one wanted him or her to be. But if we can realize that our lover is the person who exists right now — not the person we wish he or she was, not the person he or she could be, but what he or she is once that realization occurs, intimacy becomes possible.

Encouraging People to Express Themselves

People's intimate relations are usually their most important relationships. When passions are so intense, consequences so momentous, people are often hesitant to speak the truth. If they're in love, they are hesitant to admit their niggling doubts. (What if the person they love is hurt? What if their revelations destroy the relationship?) When they are angry, they don't want to speak about their love or their self-doubts, they want to lash out.

To be intimate, people have to push toward a more honest, graceful, complete, and patient communication; they must understand that ideas and feelings are necessarily complex, with many nuances, shadings, and inconsistencies. In love, there is time to clear things up.

People often discover that their affection increases when they begin to admit their irritations. They are sometimes surprised to discover, when they think they have fallen out of love or are bored with their affair, that as they begin to express their anger and ambivalence, their love comes back in a rush. Love and hate tend to flow together.

Teaching People to Deal with Their Intimates' Reactions

To say that you should communicate your ideas and feelings, *must* communicate if you are to have an intimate affair, does not mean your partner is going to like it. You can expect that when you try to express your deepest feelings, it will be unsettling. Your lover may tell you frankly how deeply you have frightened, hurt, smothered, or angered him or her — and that may be difficult to hear.

Intimates have to learn to stop responding in automatic fashion to such emotional outbursts. They have to learn to stay calm, remind themselves that they are entitled to say what they think, feel what they feel, listen to what their partners think and feel, and keep on trying. Only then is there a chance of an intimate encounter.

THE PROMISE OF ANDROGYNY

In traditional societies, men and women are gently nudged, firmly pushed, or roughly forced to conform to constrictive gender roles. Recently, however, it has become increasingly evident that such attempts to shape people do not work very well. People persist in being themselves, in spite of all efforts to the contrary.

The man or woman who strictly adheres to gender-role prescriptions, moreover, is handicapped in many ways.

For example, high femininity in women has consistently been correlated with low self-esteem, low social acceptance, and high anxiety. In men, although high masculinity has been correlated with better psychological adjustment during adolescence, by adulthood it is connected with high anxiety, high neuroticism, and low self-acceptance. Spence and Helmreich (1978) have collected considerable data to support their contention that it is the androgynous person who is best adapted to life. They found that androgynous men and women had the highest self-esteem. They also date more, receive more honors and awards during their school years, and are mentally and physically healthier than are their more sex-typed peers. Bem (1976, p. 51) writes: "For a fully effective and healthy human functioning, both masculinity and femininity must be tempered by the other, and the two must be integrated into a more balanced, more fully human, a truly androgynous personality."

In the preceding section, we argued that a simple prescription often works for couples caught up in a destructive push-pull ballet. Men and women (but especially men) can embark on a training program designed to teach them to be more comfortable in intimate encounters. Both (but especially women) can learn to be more comfortable with independence. For example, women who find themselves in the situation Napier describes can actually get more affection and intimacy if they are able to recognize when their mate is feeling smothered, take a deep breath and pull away, briefly getting the affection they need from other dates (if they are single) or

friends, or by losing themselves in work or other delights. Men in the same situation can learn that if they talk to their mate about their feelings and reassure her that she is loved, she will often look at needs for space in a new way and lighten up.

Finally, cultural and economic imperatives may be moving society willy-nilly toward greater androgyny. Women braving traditional male careers; families requiring two incomes to survive; and men being forced by their partners to attend to their emotional, intellectual, and sexual desires all suggest that powerful cultural changes are at work. Resistance to change should not be underestimated, but the attention being focused on "relationships" in all corners of society, by men as well as by women, indicates that new (and perhaps better) possibilities for more balanced behavior by couples may be afoot.

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