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Culture and Passionate Love

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I. Introduction

Cross-cultural research provides a glimpse into the complex world of passionate love and sexual desire . . . and makes it clear that people's emotional lives are shaped by their cultural and personal histories as well as "writ in their genes" and evolutionary heritage.

II. Defining Passionate Love

Ahdaf Soueif (1999), an Arab novelist, poetically described the multitude of meanings that "love" possesses in Arabic:

"Hubb" is love, "ishq" is love that entwines two people together, "shaghaf" is love that nests in the chambers of the heart, "hayam" is love that wanders the earth, "teeh" is love in which you lose yourself, "walah" is love that carries sorrow within it, "sababah" is love that exudes from your pores, "hawa" is love that shares its name with "air" and with "falling", "gharm" is love that is willing to pay the price. (pp. 386-387)

Passionate love (sometimes called "obsessive love," "infatuation," "lovesickness," or "being-in-love") is a powerful emotional state. It has been defined as:

A state of intense longing for union with another. Passionate love is a complex functional whole including appraisals or appreciations, subjective feelings, expressions, patterned physiological processes, action tendencies, and instrumental behaviors. Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy.

Unrequited love (separation) is associated with feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and despair. (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993, p. 5.)

The *Passionate Love Scale* was designed to tap into the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral indicants of such longings. (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) It has been found to be a useful measure of passionate love with men and women of all ages, in a variety of cultures (see Doherty, Hatfield, Thompson, & Choo, 1994; Landis & O'Shea, 2000.)

A. The Meaning of Passionate Love

Cultural theorists have long been interested in the meanings that young men and women ascribe to “passionate love.”

Recently, Shaver, Wu, and Schwartz (1991) interviewed young people in America, Italy, and the People's Republic of China about their emotional experiences. They found that Americans and Italians tended to equate love with happiness and to assume that both passionate and companionate love were intensely positive experiences. Students in Beijing, China, possessed a slightly darker view of love. In the Chinese language, there are few “happy-love” words; love is associated with sadness. Not surprisingly, then, the Chinese men and women interviewed by Shaver and his colleagues tended to associate passionate

love with such ideographic words as infatuation, unrequited love, nostalgia, and sorrow love.

When social psychologists explored folk conceptions of passionate love in a variety of cultures—including the People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Micronesia, Palau, South Indian Tamil, and Turkey—they found that all peoples possessed surprisingly similar views of love and other “feelings of the heart” (see Fischer, Wang, Kennedy, & Cheng, 1998; Jankowiak, 1995; Kim and Hatfield, 2004; Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001; Trawick, 1990, for a review of this research.)

Yet, cultural values do, indeed, have a subtle impact on the meanings assigned to the construct of passionate love. (Kim & Hatfield, 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993, 1996; Hatfield, Rapson, and Martel, in press; Luciano, 2003; Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001; Weaver & Ganong, 2004.)

III. The Nature of Passionate Love

A. Anthropological Perspectives

Passionate love is as old as humankind. The Sumerian love fable of Inanna and Dumuzi, for example, was spun by tribal storytellers in 2,000 BCE. (Wolkstein, 1991) Today, most anthropologists argue that passionate love is a universal experience, transcending culture and time (Buss, 1994; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996; Jankowiak, 1995; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992).

Social anthropologists have explored folk conceptions of love in such diverse cultures as The People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Turkey, Nigeria, Trinidad, Morocco, and 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. There were, of course, subtle differences in their visions of love.

B. Genetic and Biological Perspectives

Recently, social psychologists, neuro-scientists, and physiologists have begun to explore the links between love, sexual desire, and sexual behavior. The first neuroscientists to study passionate love using neuroscience techniques were Birbaumer and his colleagues (1993). They concluded passionate love is "mental chaos." More recently, Bartels and Zeki (2000, 2004) studied the neural bases of passionate love using fMRI (brain imaging) techniques. They interviewed young men and women from 11 countries and several ethnic groups who who scored high on the *Passionate Love Scale* (PLS) claimed to be "truly, deeply, and madly" in love. The authors concluded that passionate love increased activity in the brain areas associated with euphoria and reward and decreased levels of activity in the areas associated with distress and depression. Passionate love and sexual arousal appeared to be tightly linked.

A number of social psychologists, neurobiologists, and physiologists have begun to explore the neural and chemical substrates of passionate love, sexual desire, and sexual mating (Carter, 1998; Fisher, 2004; Hyde, 2005; Komisaruk & Whipple, 1998; Marazziti et al., 1999; Marazziti & Canale, 2004; Regan &

Berscheid, 1999.) This path-breaking research has the potential to answer age-old questions as to the nature of culture, love, and human sexuality.

C. Cultural Perspectives

The world's cultures differ profoundly in the extent to which they emphasize individualism or collectivism (although some cross-cultural researchers would focus on related concepts: independence or interdependence, modernism or traditionalism, urbanism or ruralism, or affluence or poverty). Individualistic cultures such as the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, and Northern and Western Europe tend to focus on personal goals. Collectivist cultures such as China, many African and Latin American nations, Greece, southern Italy, and the Pacific Islands, on the other hand, press their members to subordinate personal interests to those of the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Triandis and his colleagues (1990) point out that in individualistic cultures, young people are allowed to "do their own thing;" in collectivist cultures, the group comes first. (See Chu, 1985; Chu & Ju, 1993; Doi, 1963 and 1973, Hsu, 1953 and 1985.) On the basis of such testimony, cross-cultural researchers proposed that romantic love would be common only in modern, industrialized countries. It should be less valued in traditional cultures with strong, extended family ties (Goode, 1959; Rosenblatt, 1967; Simmons, Vom Kolke, & Shimizu, 1986.) In recent years, cultural researchers have begun to test these provocative hypotheses.

IV. Recent Research on Culture and Passionate Love

Recently, cultural researchers have begun to investigate the impact of culture on what people desire in romantic partners, their likelihood of falling in love, the intensity of their passion, and their willingness to acquiesce in arranged marriages *versus* insisting on marrying for love. From this preliminary research, it appears that although the differences cultural theorists have observed do in fact exist, oft times, cultures turn out to be more similar than one might expect. With the advent of globalization, many traditional differences may be disappearing.

Let us now turn to this research.

A. What Men and Women Desire in Romantic Partners

Since Darwin's (1871) classic treatise on *The Descent of Man*, evolutionary theorists have been interested in mate preferences. Many evolutionary psychologists contend that there are cultural universals in what men and women desire in a mate. This contention is supported by a landmark cross-cultural study conducted by Buss (1994), who asked over 10,000 men and women from 37 countries, to indicate what characteristics they sought in potential mates. Buss found that, as predicted, men tended to care more about the physical appearance and youth of their partners than did women; women tended to be more insistent that their mates possess high status and the resources necessary to protect themselves and their children than did men.

Buss was interested in cultural and gender universals; nonetheless, he could not help but be struck by the powerful impact that culture had on other

mentioned preferences. In China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel (the Palestinian Arabs), and Taiwan, for example, young people were insistent that their mate should be “chaste.” In Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and West Germany, on the other hand, most judged chastity to be relatively unimportant. A few respondents even jotted notes in the margin of the questionnaire, indicating that, for them, chastity would be a *disadvantage*.

In an alternative analysis of Buss’s (1994) data, Wallen (1989) attempted to determine which was the most important—culture or gender—in shaping people’s mate preferences. He found that for a few traits—such as good looks and financial prospects—gender had an important influence on preferences. For other traits—such as chastity, ambition, and preferred age—on the other hand, culture mattered far more. Wallen concluded that, in general, culture may be even more powerful than one’s evolutionary heritage in understanding mate selection.

Cultural researchers provide additional evidence that in different cultural, national, and ethnic groups, people often desire very different things in romantic, sexual, or marital partners. Hatfield and Sprecher (1996), for example, studied three powerful, modern, and industrial societies—the United States, Russia, and Japan. Men and women in Western, individualistic cultures (such as the United States and to some extent Russia) expected far more from their marriages than did couples in a collectivist culture (such as Japan).

As we observed earlier, cultural theorists have predicted that cultural rules should exert a profound impact on the commonness of passionate feelings within

a culture, how intensely passion is experienced, and how people attempt to deal with these tumultuous feelings. Alas, the sparse existing data, provide only minimal support for this intriguing and plausible sounding hypothesis.

B. The Likelihood of Being-in-Love

Sprecher and her colleagues (1994) interviewed 1,667 men and women in the United States, Russia, and Japan. Based on notions of individualism versus collectivism, the authors predicted that American men and women would be most vulnerable to love, the Japanese the least likely to be “love besotted.” They were wrong. In fact, 59% of American college students, 67% of Russians, and 53% of Japanese students said they were in love at the time of the interview. In all three cultures, men were slightly less likely than were women to be in love. There was no evidence, however, that individualistic cultures breed young men and women who are more love-struck than do collectivist societies.

Similarly, surveys of Mexican-American, Chinese-American, and Euro-American students have found that in a variety of ethnic groups, young men and women show similarly high rates of “being in love at the present time.” (Aron & Rodriguez, 1992; Doherty, Hatfield, Thompson, & Choo, 1994).

C. The Intensity of Passionate Love

Cultures also seem to share more similarities than differences in the *intensity* of passionate love they experience. In one study, Hatfield and Rapson (1996) asked men and women of European, Filipino, and Japanese ancestry to complete the *Passionate Love Scale*. To their surprise, they found that men and women from the various ethnic groups seemed to love with equal passion. Their

results were confirmed in a study conducted by Doherty and his colleagues (1994) with European-American, Chinese-Americans, Filipino-American, Japanese-American, and Pacific Islanders.

VII. In Conclusion

The preceding studies, then, suggest that the profound differences that once existed between Westernized, modern, urban, industrial societies and Eastern, modern, urban industrial societies may be fast disappearing. In spite of the censure of their elders, in a variety of traditional cultures, young people are increasingly adopting “Western” patterns—placing a high value on “falling in love,” pressing for gender equality in love and sex, and insisting on marrying for love (as opposed to arranged marriages.) Such changes have been documented in Finland, Estonia, and Russia (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003) as well as among the Australian aboriginal peoples of Mangrove and a Copper Inuit Alaskan Indian tribe (see Jankowiak, 1995, for an extensive review of this research.)

Many have observed that today two powerful forces—globalization and cultural pride/identification with one’s country (what historians call “nationalism”)—are contending for men’s and women’s souls. True, to some extent, the world’s citizens may to some extent be becoming “one,” but in truth the delightful and divisive cultural variations that have made our world both such an interesting, and simultaneously dangerous place, are likely to add spice to that heady brew of love and sexual practices for some time to come. The convergence of cultures around the world may be reducing the differences in the

ways passionate love is experienced and expressed in our world, but tradition can be tenacious and the global future of passionate love cannot be predicted with any certainty.

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