

Older Women's Perceptions of Their Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

According to folklore and some recent theorists (see Hatfield & Walster, 1978; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977), the passage of time should have a very different effect on passionate vs. companionate love. Passionate love should decline fairly quickly, while companionate love should remain fairly stable over time.

To test this hypothesis and others, we interviewed 240 older women, ranging in age from 50-82, who had been married varying lengths of time, about their love for their partners and their partner's love for them. The data suggest that folklore and the theorists may be wrong. Time did have a corrosive effect on love--but it had an equally corrosive effect on both passionate and companionate love.

Older Women's Perceptions of Their Intimate Relationships

While the study of love has traditionally been the province of novelists and poets, behavioral scientists in increasing numbers are beginning to investigate this phenomenon (for reviews, see Cunningham & Antill, 1981; Duck & Gilmour, 1980, 1981 ^{and} a₁b., 1982; Kelley et al., 1983).

Unfortunately, most of the research in this area has been with college-age students (see Hatfield & Walster, 1981; Hatfield et al., in press, for a review of this research). Consequently, little is known about love and intimacy at later stages of the life-cycle. Given that an increasing proportion of the population is over fifty years of age, it seems important to research intimacy among the middle-aged and elderly. Furthermore, only by examining relationships in such an age-group will it be possible to know how love is experienced by couples who have been together for several decades. In general, research indicates that love is the area of greatest marital satisfaction for both older wives and older husbands (see Eshleman, 1978). In a study of 408 older husbands and wives, for example, Stinnett et al. (1972) found that a high proportion of the respondents rated their relationships as "very happy" or "happy." In addition, they found that many elderly men and women reported "being in love" as the most important factor in achieving marital success.

Defining Love

The love feelings experienced for an intimate other have traditionally been dichotomized into two types: The first kind of love is very intense and emotional--and has variously been called "romantic love" (Burgess, 1926; Driscoll, Davis & Lipetz, 1972; Rubin, 1970, 1973), "limerence" (Tennoy, 1979),

and "passionate love" (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977; Hatfield & Walster, 1981). The second kind of love is less intense and based on sharing life's experiences. It has been called "conjugal love" (Burgess, 1926; Driscoll et al., 1972), "affectionate love" (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977), and "companionate love" (Hatfield & Walster, 1981).

We will choose the terms passionate love and companionate love to describe the feelings potentially experienced in the intimate relations of elderly couples. Passionate love has often been described as an intensely emotional state, associated with tender and sexual feelings. One becomes completely preoccupied with the loved one, and desires to give everything to the relationship. Passionate love has also been described as having a negative side. There may be pain and anxiety, for example, if the loved one does not reciprocate in kind. Hatfield and Walster (1981) define passionate love in the following way:

Passionate Love: A state of intense longing for union with an other. 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. (p. 9)

Companionate love, on the other hand, is a low-key emotion, with feelings of friendly affection and deep attachment. It has been described as involving friendship, understanding, and a concern for the welfare of the other (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). Hatfield and Walster (1981) define companionate love in the following way:

The affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined. (p. 9)

Gender Differences in Passionate and Companionate Love

According to folklore, women are more loving than are men. Theorists from various disciplines and of every political persuasion have assumed that the cultural stereotype--women love and men work--has a ring of truth. (See, for example, Langhorn & Secord, 1955; Parsons, 1959; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Even modern feminists agree that love is more important for women than for men. For example, in the Dialectic of Sex, Firestone (1970) writes:

That women live for love and men for work is a truism...Men were thinking, writing, and creating, because women were pouring their energies into those men; women...are preoccupied with love. (pp. 126-127)

Dinnerstein (1970) writes:

It has often been pointed out that women depend lopsidely 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 lopsidely on participation in the public domain because they are stymied by love. (p. 70)

The evidence that has been gathered, however, suggests that gender differences in love may be more complicated than originally thought. (See Hatfield, 1982 or ~~research~~^{research.} Peplau, 1983 for a review of this.) In general, whether men or women are found to love more passionately or companionately depends on how love is measured. A few studies indicate that women love more passionately than do men. (See Dion & Dion, 1973; Kanin, Davidson, & Scheck, 1970.) An equal number suggest that men and women do not differ in how passionately they love. (See Hatfield et al., 1982; Rubin, 1973; Sprecher-Fisher, 1980; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981.)

Not a single study exists which shows that men love more passionately than do women. When it comes to companionate love, however, the results seem to be clear--women like and companionately love their partners more than they are liked and companionately loved in return (see Hatfield et al., 1982; Rubin, 1973; Sprecher-Fisher, 1980; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981). Unfortunately, however, all the studies on which these conclusions are based were done with younger men and women. If anything, then, early in life women do seem to love more--probably more passionately and certainly more companionately--than they are loved in return. No evidence, however, exists to indicate whether these gender differences are also characteristic of older couples.

Changes Over Time in Love

According to folklore, passionate love lasts for only a short time. If a couple is lucky, passionate love evolves into companionate love. Companionate love is believed to be a more stable kind of love--it can, and often does, last a lifetime. Safilios-Rothschild (1977) writes:

Sometimes romantic passion slowly diminishes in strength and becomes transformed into a stable and tender "affectionate love" that is able to withstand the responsibility, problems, and routine, and even boredom that come with a lasting relationship. (p. 10)

This idea of a linear passage from passion to companionship has been incorporated into stage theories of relationship development. Goldstine et al. (1977), for example, identified three stages through which relationships pass. Stage 1 is characterized by such symptoms of passionate love as excitement and vulnerability. In Stage 2, there is

a period of disillusionment during which passionate love seems to wane. For those couples who reach Stage 3, it is a period in which companionate love becomes more prominent. Expectations for each other are realistic and there is a sense of security in the relationship. Coleman (1977) identified five stages to relationship development: 1) recognition, 2) engagement, 3) harmony, 4) discordance, 5) resolution. In the second and third stages, idealization, physical attraction, and other characteristics of passionate love are found to be most intense. In the resolution stage, a more realistic type of love (companionate love) begins to develop. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies exist to suggest that feelings of love do change over the course of a relationship as folklore and stage theories expect. (See Cimbalò, Failing, & Mousaw, 1976; Driscoll et al., 1972; Pam, 1970.)

Some empirical research, however, suggests that passionate love does not necessarily die as companionate love emerges. These studies, in contrast to the studies cited above, include couples married over 20 years. Knox (1970) interviewed three groups of couples: dating high school seniors; couples married less than 5 years; and couples married more than 20 years. He found that both the youngest group and the oldest group had the most romantic love. Munro and Adams (1978) also found that romantic love was higher for dating couples and couples married a long time than for young married couples. These authors presented a very ingenious explanation for this curvilinear relationship. They suggest that romantic (or passionate) love is highest when there is low role structure in the relationship. Role structure is especially low in the early dating period and then late in the marriage when children have left home. Role

structure is highest early in a marriage when a household is being established, and children are arriving. Finally, Reedy, Bereen, and Schaie (1981) and Swensen, Eskey, and Kahlehepp (1981) observe that different aspects of love are important at different stages in the life cycle.

The Dark Side of Love

Theorists have recognized that in intimate relationships, couples may have both intensely positive and intensely negative feelings for one another. Such negative feelings as anger, resentment, and depression may be experienced by intimates. Perlmutter and Hatfield (1980) observe that one of the primary characteristics of intimate relationships is:

Intensity of feelings: Intimates care about one another. Most intimates love one another. Of course people are complex and almost often intimate's deepest feelings of love are laced with dislike and hatred. Occasionally intimates hate one another. Some couples have battled intimately for 25 years or more. But whatever it is the intimates feel, they feel intensely. (p. 18)

That negative feelings are an integral part of intimacy is indicated by work done by Braiker and Kelley (1979). In a set of studies, they found that a principal dimension in descriptions married couples give of the development of their relationship is what the researchers called conflict-negativity. This factor includes feeling angry and resentful toward the partner and communicating negative feelings. These researchers found that the amount of conflict-negativity in the relationships was independent of the amount of love expressed. Those

couples who reported high negative feelings were not necessarily less likely to report high love feelings than those couples who reported low negative feelings. The researchers also found that the overall degree of reported conflict-negativity tended to increase and then finally level off as the relationship progressed.

Gender differences in negative feelings. For some reason, most theorists have not been interested in whether or not there are gender differences in how negatively men and women feel about each other in their intimate relations. No evidence exists to indicate whether such feelings as anger, resentment, and depression are more likely to be experienced by men or women in their relationships.

Changes over time in negative feelings. In general, research on marital satisfaction over the life cycle has found that husbands and wives have most negative feelings toward one another during the child-bearing and child-raising stages. These negative feelings decrease by later stages (Rollins & Feldman, 1970). Other studies, however, indicate that there may not be a decline in negative feelings in later stages of the life cycle (Pineo, 1964; Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975). A touch of conflict may always exist in intimate relationships.

The Purpose of This Investigation

The following study was designed to explore the issues described above in an age group typically ignored in past research--that of middle-aged and elderly couples. From the perspective of the female partner of the relationship, we will attempt to answer the following four questions.

- 1) In the later years of life, who loves more passionately and more companionately--men or women?
- 2) In the later years of life, who has the most negative feelings about their relationships--men or women?
- 3) What effect does length of the relationship have on passionate love vs. companionate love, as expressed by women?
- 4) What effect does length of the relationship have on resentment/hostility and depression, as expressed by women?

Method

Sample

In June 1978, as part of a multidisciplinary study of aging women, a random sample of 240 older women from different areas of Madison, Wisconsin were interviewed. The women ranged in age from 50 to 82, and came from a variety of social backgrounds and work statuses. About one-third of the women were working either part-time or full-time. The rest of the women were either presently not working or retired.

In order to determine the sample's representativeness, characteristics of the sample were compared to the national population. Because Madison is an exceptional city in its educational and cultural facilities, its population tends to be more highly educated than populations from other cities. This bias was reflected in the random sample selected. Overall, this group was slightly better off than other American older women. The median annual income for the women was approximately \$2,000 higher than the national median income of older women. The respondents were also very highly educated compared to national averages for older women.

The 240 women in the sample were asked to describe the most important person in their lives. If the relationship they described was a sexual one, whether or not it was with their husband, they received the intimacy questions. These are the questions on which the data below are based. One hundred and six of the 240 women reported an ongoing sexual relationship. For most of these women, it was with their husband; for a very few it was with a spouse equivalent.

Length of marriage (relationship). We asked women "What was the date of your marriage?" (In those few instances in which women were cohabitating, we asked what date they and their partner began living together.) On the basis of this information, we divided women into two approximately equal groups: those married a short time (less than 33 years) and those married a longer time (more than 33 years).

Measures

Assessing passionate and companionate love. During the interview, we asked women:

People seem to experience two different kinds of love; we call them "passionate love" and "companionate love." Passionate love could be described as a wildly emotional state, with associated tender and sexual feelings, elation and pain, anxiety and relief. Companionate love involves more low-keyed emotion, with feeling of friendly affection and deep attachment. Using the response scale below, and thinking over the last six months or so, answer our questions about these feelings in your marriage.

- (1) What is the level of passionate love that you feel for your partner?
- (2) What is the level of passionate love that your partner feels for you?
- (3) What is the level of companionate love that you feel for your partner?
- (4) What is the level of companionate love that your partner feels for you?
 1. None at all
 2. Very little
 3. Some
 4. A great deal
 5. A tremendous amount

Assessing Resentment-Hostility and Depression:

Later in the interview, respondents were asked:

Relationships go through stages; sometimes, for a period, the wife feels seething resentment toward her husband--and the way he treats her. At other times she may feel hostile or depressed. Her husband may feel the same way. Sometimes they will express these feelings, other times they will keep them inside. Thinking over the last six months or so:

- (1) What is the level of resentment that you feel toward your partner?
- (2) What is the level of resentment that your partner feels for you?

- (3) What is the level of hostility that you feel toward your partner?
 - (4) What is the level of hostility that your partner feels toward you?
 - (5) What is the level of depression that you feel as a result of the relationship?
 - (6) What is the level of depression that your partner feels as a result of the relationship?
1. None at all
 2. Very little
 3. Some
 4. A great deal
 5. A tremendous amount

Results and Discussion

We will now examine and discuss the results for the questions that we initially posed.

Who Loves More Passionately and More Companionately--Men or Women?

As shown in Table 1, women perceived that their partners passionately loved them more than they loved their partners in return ($t = 2.91$; $p < .010$). Conversely, no difference was found between how much women companionately loved and how much they perceived their partner companionately loved ($t = .42$; n.s.).

Insert Table 1 about here

In previous studies of dating and newlywed couples, researchers have generally found that men and women passionately love each other with approximately the same intensity. Women tend to companionately love their partner more than they are companionately loved in return. In this sample, on the other hand, we secured quite different results. Men were perceived to be more passionately in love than were their partners. For the first time, there were no gender differences in companionate love. It appears that in the last stages of life, men and women have come to (companionately) love one another with equal intensity. How can we account for the fact that our results differ so markedly from those found in previous studies with samples of younger adults?

First, we must point out that our data are only suggestive. Because men were not interviewed, we had only the women's perception of how the male felt in the relationship. Perhaps the results are telling us more about gender differences as perceived by older women than about actual gender differences. At a minimum, however, the results tell us that older women feel more passionately loved by their husbands than older women passionately love in return.

However, assuming that the females have accurately assessed how their husbands feel, what can we conclude from the results as we compare them to what has been found with younger men and women?

One possibility is that the results may be suggestive of a possible historical change in the "double-standard." For most elderly people, the term "passionate love" suggests sexual love. In the Victorian era, men were supposed to love sexually...while women were not. Perhaps that is why, in our older sample, we find gender differences in the willingness to

admit to feelings that we do not secure in a more egalitarian sample. (See Delater & MacCorquodale, 1979, for an elaboration of this argument.)

Another possible historical shift is suggested by the results. Because traditionally women were likely to be dependent upon the man they marry for status and economic well-being, they have tended not to marry because of passionate emotions. Instead, they have had to control their emotional yearnings in order to pursue a relationship with "Mr. Right", the man with the proper social background and the promising potential. Men, on the other hand, traditionally have had the luxury of marrying the woman they passionately love. They have also had the freedom to initiate relationships with those they were in love with, while women have had to passively wait for suitors who were interested in them.

Safilios-Rothschild (1977) observes:

...Women less often than men end up marrying the person they love. In the case of men their own love feelings tend to determine their marital choice more than their partner's feelings. In the case of women the contrary trend has been true: The intensity of the future husband's love feelings carries more weight than their own feelings. There is research evidence that the type of love asymmetry in which the husband is perceived (by both spouses) as the most loving of the two is at least twice as frequent as the reverse asymmetry. (p. 72)

Today, however, women depend less on marriage for their status and financial well-being. They are allowed to pursue educational and career opportunities. It has also become more acceptable for women to initiate relationships with men to whom they are attracted. Thus, it is likely

that today, young men and women have equal freedom to marry those they passionately love.

One other possible explanation for the results should be considered. The differences may reflect life span differences. At an early age, men and women may both love one another with intense, and almost equal, passion. Later in life, men decline less in passionate feelings than do women. Theorists who have argued that men and women's sexual feelings for their partners should decline at different rates, however, have posited that men should lose sexual interest in their partners more quickly than should women (Griffith, in press; Symond^s, 1979). They argue that for men, youth + beauty = sexuality. For women, power + position = sexuality. According to these theorists, men are capable of less passion in old age than are their wives. We find, however, that older men passionately love more than older women. If we are to unravel this perplexing finding, it is clear that more systematic research needs to be conducted--examining a group of women and a group of men over a longer period of time.

Who Has the Most Negative Feelings About Their Relationships--Men or Women?

In conducting the analyses, we constructed two indexes of negative feelings--resentment/hostility and depression. Because the emotions of resentment and hostility are conceptually close (in that they are both directed to the partner), they were averaged to form an index of negative feelings toward the partner. Depression, on the other hand, is not directed to the partner. Psychologists generally consider it to be "aggression turned inward."

While women reported feeling slightly more resentment/hostility and depression than they perceived their partner as experiencing, these differences were not significant. As indicated in Table 1, there appears to be no difference in men vs. women's feelings of resentment/hostility and depression.

What may be interesting to examine in a future investigation is whether the sources of hostility-resentment and depression experienced in the relationship are different for men and women.

What Effect Does Length of the Relationship Have on Passionate Love vs. Companionate Love as Expressed by Women?

Ideally, of course, one would answer this question via a longitudinal study. This alternative was not available to us. We thought we could get some useful, suggestive data via the following procedure. In order to test this hypothesis, we utilized a 2 x 2 factorial analysis of variance design, which included: length of marriage (short vs. long) and type-of-love-(passionate vs. companionate love). (In this design, type-of-love was considered a within-subject factor.)

As folklore and literature suggest, one would expect the passage of time to have different effects on passionate love vs. companionate love. Over time, passionate love should decline fairly quickly while companionate love should remain fairly stable. Thus, we would predict a significant length of relationship x type-of-love interaction.

Insert Table 2 about here

No support, however was found for this hypothesis (see Table 2). Length of time married does have a corrosive effect on love in general [$F(1,94) = 4.07$; $p < .05$], but it seems to be no more destructive of passionate love than of companionate love. [Interaction $F(1,94)$ for length of relationship $\times$ type of love = .01, n.s..]

How do we interpret this surprising finding? One can draw an optimistic conclusion or a pessimistic one. The positive side, is that even after several years of marriage, the women are still reporting relatively high levels of both passionate and companionate love. Women married less than 33 years report feeling in between "some" and "a great deal" of passionate love for their partners. Women married much longer continue to feel "some" passionate love and "a great deal" of companionate love. While we expected companionate love to remain uniformly high (or even increase) throughout the life cycle, the finding that passionate feelings also remained quite high is encouraging. Contrary to what is often portrayed by the mass media, older persons married for several years can still experience excitement and passion in the relationship.

However, if one wants to interpret the results pessimistically, then emphasis can be given to the significant difference found between women married for less than 33 years and women married for over 33 years. Women married for the longer period of time did report slightly less passionate and companionate love than women married for a shorter period of time.

What Effect Does Length of the Relationship Have on Resentment/Hostility and Depression as Expressed by Women?

Length of the relationship seems to have no significant effect on the dark side of love (see Tables 1 and 2). Older women married for

less than 33 years expressed in between "very little" and "some" resentment/hostility toward their partners and in between "none" and "very little" depression about their relationship. Older women married for much longer reported much the same. They still reported feeling in between "very little" and "some" resentment/hostility and in between "none" and "very little" depression about the relationship. [For resentment/hostility, the $F(1,92) = 2.32$; n.s.; for depression the $F(1,97) = .98$, n.s.] The data then, suggest, that throughout their marriage, women feel a small amount of hostility/resentment and depression. "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

These results are consistent with work done by Braiker and Kelley (1979) on the development of close relationships. They found that while negative feelings increased in the dating stage of the relationship, they level off and do not decrease or increase as the relationship evolves into marriage. Projecting from their findings, we may expect that the ~~level of conflict and negativity does not even change much over several~~ years and decades of marriage. The results here seem to support such a notion.

Summary

This investigation was initiated because of the lack of research on intimacy among older couples. One-hundred and six women aged 50 years or older were interviewed about the feelings they had for their husband or intimate other. They were asked to indicate how much "passionate love" and "companionate love" they felt for their partner-- and also how much resentment/hostility, and depression they experienced in the relationship. They women were also asked a parallel set of

questions referring to how they thought their husbands loved and felt in the relationship.

The following results were found and briefly discussed:

- 1) As perceived by women, men passionately loved more in the relationship than women. No difference, however, was found between men and women in how much they companionately loved.
- 2) As perceived by women, no differences were found between men and women in how much resentment-hostility and depression they experienced in the relationship.
- 3) Length of relationship did not have a more corrosive effect on passionate love than on companionate love for women--both declined somewhat as length of relationship increased.
- 4) Length of relationship did not have an effect on the amount of resentment/hostility and depression experienced by women. It appears that throughout marriage, women feel a small amount of hostility-resentment and depression.

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Footnotes

This research was supported, in part, by a National Institute of Health Grant for Biomedical Research to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1980. In previous studies of dating and newlywed couples, couples reported feeling less passionate than companionate love for one another. Older couples, too, feel less passionate than companionate toward one another. For the women's feelings, $F(1, 103) = 25.89$; $p < .001$. For women's estimates of their husband's feelings, $F(1, 103) = 16.38$; $p < .001$.

Table 1

Women's Feelings for Their Partners and Their
Estimates as to Their Partners' Feelings for Them

Respondents	(N)	How much Passionate love do you feel for your partner? ¹	How much Companionate love do you feel for your partner? ¹	How much resentment & hostility do you feel for your partner? ¹	How much depression do you feel as a result of the relationship? ¹
Women's own feelings	(93-99)	3.11	4.10	2.45	1.62
Women's guesses as to their husband's feelings	(93-99)	3.24	4.08	2.39	1.57
(S.D.)		(.51)	(.47)	(1.02)	(.50)
<u>t-tests</u>					
		2.91**	.42	1.22	1.23
Main effect: Women's feelings vs. their guesses as to their husband's feelings.					
<u>d.f.</u>		1/96	1/98	1/92	1/96

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

¹The higher the number, the more
passionate love, companionate love,
resentment/hostility, and depression
the respondent feels or assumes her
partner feels.

Table 2

Women's Feelings for Their Partners and Their
Estimates as to Their Partners' Feelings for Them

Respondents	(N)	How much Passionate love do you feel for your partner?	How much Companionate love do you feel for your partner?	How much resentment & hostility do you feel for your partner?	How much depression do you feel as a result of the relationship?
<u>Women's Feelings</u>					
Women married 33 years or <u>less</u>	(43-46)	3.27	4.24	2.24	1.72
Women married 34 years or <u>more</u>	(51-53)	2.98	3.98	2.53	1.55
S.D.		(.95)	(.71)	(.91)	(.85)
<u>F-Tests</u>					
Main effect: Length of marriage		2.20	3.37	2.32	.98
<u>d.f.</u>		1/94	1/95	1/92	1/97
<u>Women's Guesses As to Their Husband's Feelings</u>					
Women married 33 years or <u>less</u>	(41-44)	3.45	4.23	2.41	1.56
Women married 34 years or <u>more</u>	(50-52)	3.06	3.94	2.41	1.57
S.D.		(.96)	(.76)	(.95)	(.79)
<u>F-Tests</u>					
Main effect: Length of marriage		4.10*	3.51	.01	.00
<u>d.f.</u>		1/92	1/93	1/90	1/92

* $p < .05$
 ** $p < .01$
 *** $p < .001$

1. The higher the number, the more passionate love, companionate love, resentment/hostility, and depression the respondent feels or assumes her partner feels.