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# A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON ROMANTIC LOVE<sup>1</sup>

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The anthropological study of romantic (or passionate) love is virtually nonexistent due to the widespread belief that romantic love is unique to Euro-American culture. This belief is by no means confined to anthropology. The historian Philippe Aries (1962), for example, argues that affection was of secondary importance to more utilitarian ambitions throughout much of European history. Lawrence Stone (1988:16) goes further, insisting that "if romantic love ever existed outside of Europe, it only arose among the nonwestern nation-states' elite who had the time to cultivate an aesthetic appreciation for subjective experiences." Underlying these Eurocentric views is the assumption that modernization and the rise of individualism are directly linked to the appearance of romantic notions of love.

The validity of an affectionless past is challenged by some historians who draw upon the insights of an earlier generation of anthropologists (e.g., Lowie 1950; Westermarck 1922) to argue that European preindustrial courtship was neither cold, aloof, nor devoid of affection (Gillis 1988; MacDonald 1981; MacFarlane 1987; Pollock 1983). However, much of this revisionist work continues to explain instances of romantic love as a basis for marriage, ignoring the role romantic love plays in affairs (see Stearns and Stearns 1985). Consequently, little has been done to alter the prevalent opinion that romantic love is a European contribution to world culture.

Paul Rosenblatt (1966; 1967), a psychologist, in a pioneering series of holocultural investigations, correlated modes of cultural transmission and social organization to the emergence of romantic love as a basis for marriage. Writing within the 1960s functionalist milieu, he assumed like almost everyone else that the social construction of reality had a corresponding impact on the construction and expression of private sentiment. In effect, one assumed the other (see also Coppinger and Rosenblatt 1968).

The premise of much of this research is apparent: cultural traditions bind the individual emotionally into a web of dependency with others, thereby rechannelling or defusing the intensity of an individual's emotional experience. This web of dependency, in turn, undermines the individual's proclivity to fantasize about a lover or the erotic (Averill 1980; de Rougement 1974; Dion and Dion 1988; Endleman 1989; Hsu 1981).

Recently, some evolutionary-oriented anthropologists and psychologists have explored the possibility that romantic love constitutes a human universal (Buss

1988; Fisher 1987; Tennov 1984). These researchers argue that humans have evolved the propensity to experience romantic love which can be recognized by a sudden, unrestrained passion often resulting in the individual entering into an immediate, if short term, commitment. In this view romantic love centers on a biological core that is expressed as love and enacted in courtship (Perper 1985). Concurring, Liebowitz (1983) draws upon biochemical research that suggests that the giddiness, euphoria, optimism, and energy lovers experience in early stages of infatuation is caused by increased levels of phenylethylamine (PEA), an amphetamine-related compound that produces mood-lifting and energizing effects (also see Fisher 1987). This evolutionary perspective suggests that romantic love arises from forces within the hominid brain that are independent of the socially constructed mind. From this perspective, romantic love must be present, in some form or another, within every culture.

This paper draws upon Murdock and White's (1969) Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) of 186 societies in order to identify those cultures in which romantic love, at least within the domain of private experience, is present or absent. Unlike in the previous holocultural studies, whereby only the normative sphere was examined, we focused on both the idiosyncratic and the normative for evidence of romantic love presence.

By romantic love we mean any intense attraction that involves the idealization of the other, within an erotic context, with the expectation of enduring for some time into the future<sup>2</sup> (see Lindholm 1988). Romantic love stands in sharp contrast to the companionship phase of love (sometimes referred to as attachment) which is characterized by the growth of a more peaceful, comfortable, and fulfilling relationship; it is a strong and enduring affection built upon long term association (Hatfield 1988; Liebowitz 1983).

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this project come primarily from the works recommended in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS). By first consulting these authorities, we sought to control for Galton's problem.

Our research procedure was to first, examine the collective works of the ethnographic authorities recommended by Murdock and White. If that material proved vague and therefore inconclusive, we then analyzed, whenever possible, the culture's folklore. When no folklore was available, other supplemental ethnographies were examined, provided that the culture's subsistence system, social structure, and cosmological system had not undergone any significant transformation. For example, because Lizot (1985) and Chagnon (1983) both worked among unacculturated Yanomamo, Lizot's account of Yanomamo love experience is cited as confirmation that romantic love was not an unknown experience. On the other hand, the present-day Siriono social organization and subsistence base bears only a faint resemblance to the previous generation. The fact that Stearman (1987) found evidence of romantic love among contemporary town-dwelling Siriono does not mean that some of the forest dwelling Siriono also experienced romantic love. Consequently, her study could not be used to supplement Holmberg's (1969) account.

A culture was dropped from our sample if: (1) there was no reliable or relevant source material available; (2) the SCCS's primary or supplemental authorities did

not discuss courtship, marriage, or family relations; and (3) the inability of the coders to agree whether a specific passage conclusively indicated romantic love's presence (N=1). Using these criteria, twenty cultures were dropped, leaving us with a sample universe of 166 societies.

Besides the usual difficulties in finding reliable source material, our primary methodological problem arose from the absence of any clear and consistent usage of the terms love, lovemaking and lovers. Because ethnographers often fail to distinguish between love and sexual intercourse, it is unclear if they are referring to passionate love or only using a common metaphor for sexual intercourse. In order to distinguish between behaviors motivated solely out of lust or physical satisfaction from those motivated by romantic love, additional indices were required. Thus the presence of romantic love in a culture was coded only when the ethnographer made a clear distinction between lust and love, and then noted the presence of love. There was, however, one exception. If the ethnographer claimed that romantic love was not present, yet provided a folktale or an incident that demonstrated passionate involvement, his or her interpretation was rejected. Only two such discrepancies appeared in our sample population (i.e., Manus, Pakistan).

In over 250 ethnographic and folkloric studies examined not a single researcher explicitly defined romantic love. Those ethnographers who insisted that the phenomenon did not exist rarely noted which psychological attitudes or behavioral traits were absent. This lacuna arose from overlooking the exceptional or non-normative act, as well as from failing to distinguish between lust and the two fundamental types of love experience; romantic and companionship love.

The most problematic cross-cultural studies are those that use high inferences indices. We were at pains therefore to find richly textured illustrations of romantic love's presences. Because many ethnographies did not supply such cases, we relied upon other indicative clues or indices.

The criteria (listed below) are similar to those used in previous cross-cultural studies that sought to document the ecological and social factors responsible for the emergence of romantic love as a basis for marriage. These studies examined specific acts (e.g., elopement, love magic, and love songs) that suggest choice for attachment and thus the presence of passionate affection.

With the exception of love magic, we used similar indices. It is important to stress, however, that we recorded as positive only those cases where the ethnographer recorded an expressive motive (i.e., mutual affection) and not an instrumental motive (i.e., meat for sex). If the ethnographer simply reported the presence of elopement, but did not supply additional information concerning the individual's motivation, then that culture was coded as romantic love absent. In this way, our criteria are more precise than previous cross-cultural studies of romantic love. Moreover, unlike previous cross-cultural studies, we read whenever possible a culture's folklore. This proved to be the most fruitful means to document the presences of the romantic love. Finally, to determine the presence or absence of romantic love, only the initial phase of involvement (i.e., less than two years) was examined. The phase of the love relationships was determined through examining the ethnographic context. Unless one of the indicators discussed below was present, we never inferred romantic love's presence.

The following indicators were used to assess the presence of romantic love within a culture during the first two years of involvement (marriage or other):

1. accounts depicting personal anguish and longing;
2. the use of love songs or folklore that highlight the motivations behind romantic involvement;
3. elopement due to mutual affection;
4. native accounts affirming the existence of passionate love; and
5. the ethnographer's affirmation that romantic love is present.

On the basis of the above indicators, each of the 166 societies were coded and labelled as either (a) love present or (b) love absent. The presence of any one of these indicators was taken as evidence of the presence of romantic love. Each researcher photocopied the page(s) on which he found indicators of romantic love. At a later date, the researchers independently recoded each other's original coding to insure reliability. Unresolved disagreements (n=1) were dropped from the sample.

## RESULTS

TABLE 1: Culture Area and Romantic Love

|                         | Romantic Love |           |
|-------------------------|---------------|-----------|
|                         | +             | -         |
| Circum-Medit.           | 22 (95.7%)    | 1 (4.3%)  |
| Sub-Saharan Africa      | 20 (76.9%)    | 6 (23.1%) |
| East Eurasia            | 32 (94.1%)    | 1 (5.9%)  |
| Insular Pacific         | 27 (93.1%)    | 2 (6.9%)  |
| North America           | 24 (82.8%)    | 5 (17.2%) |
| South & Central America | 22 (84.6%)    | 4 (15.4%) |

## DISCUSSION

To provide a more revealing illustration of our findings, three ethnographic examples that are highly representative of the entire sample set are presented below to highlight the intensity, commitment, pathos, and romantic idealization of the other. The examples illustrate through indigenous representations of romantic love (see #1 and #2), and provide a case in which an ethnographer clearly distinguished between passionate love and lust (see #3).

(1) Nisa, a Kung woman, who lived in a hunting and gathering society in the Kalihari desert, clearly differentiated between passionate and companionship love by drawing a distinction between a husband and a lover. Nisa notes that the former relationship is "rich, warm and secure. The [latter] is passionate and exciting, although often fleeting and undependable" (Shostak 1981:267). Nisa adds that "when two people come together their hearts are on fire and their passion is very great. After a while, the fire cools and that's how it stays" (Shostak 1981:269).

(2) John Turi (1931), in his autobiography, commented on some of the behavioral manifestations of infatuation that befell many Lapp herders during

courtship. He writes that "the mind is often a little wild, especially in those who have that sort of blood. The explanation of why some folk have such weak blood that it is rather easy to upset them is that some people are of such an amorous nature that at the time they can think of nothing else... And some folk are still in love afterwards, but it is not everyone who is in love afterwards."

(3) During the Sung Dynasty (928-1233) the most popular tale among both the literary and nonliterate population was that of the *Jade Goddess*. It is a tale about Chang Po who falls in love with a woman who is already engaged. When he felt that "the greatest desire of his was beyond him" (Lin 1961:75), he loses interest in work and lapses into a prolonged despair, a love-despair that closely resembles that which was being discussed in the Romance poems of Europe at the same time. Finally, he confronts the girl about his love and discovers she has similar feelings. They elope. After awhile, however, suffering from poverty and isolation, they decide to return home. On the night they are to leave, Chang Po draws the girl into his arms and says "since heaven and earth were created you were made for me and I will not let you go. It cannot be wrong to love you" (Lin 1961:74). In several ways, this tale runs parallel to the Tristan and Isolde folk-legend and variations in its clear-eyed delineation of romantic love (see Jankowiak 1992).

Although at least one incident of passionate love was documented in 147 out of 166 cultures or more than 88.5 per cent; no evidence was found for its existence in 19 (11.5 per cent) of the cultures. Of the nineteen cases in which romantic love was not found, for example, only one ethnographer (Holmberg 1969) makes the distinction between romantic love and lust and then proceeds to deny the presence of romantic love. The other eighteen ethnographies note that sexual affairs do occur, but do not explore the motive for entering into these, and thus we are unable to determine if romantic love is one of the motives. These cultures are coded "romantic love not present." Nonetheless, we believe that these negative cases arise from ethnographic oversight rather than any set of cultural norms that prevent an individual from experiencing romantic affection.<sup>3</sup> There are two explanations that may account for the African cultural area as having the higher percentage of inconclusiveness. First, the absence of folklore. For example, we were able to find folklore material for only four out of the 26 African cultures. More importantly, we were not able to find any folklore for the seven cultures classified as inconclusive. Second, in many African cultures passionate affection is expressed in a variety of nonverbal idioms seldom studied by an earlier generation of ethnographers (James Bell, personal communication).

It is important to note that not everyone within a culture falls in love. This seldom occurs even in the so-called romantic cultures (i.e., Euro-American cultures) that celebrate passionate entanglements in its literature, films, and mythology. By the same token, this should not undermine our finding that in almost every culture there are some individuals who, often in the face of severe negative sanctions, do fall in love.

Romantic love may in fact be muted, though never entirely repressed, by other cultural variables. Because researchers have rarely studied the relative frequency in which a person falls in and out of love, it is unclear if romantic love is experienced with less frequency in those cultures that deny or disapprove of the emotional experience. The relative frequency in which members of a community experience romantic love may very well depend upon that culture's social organization and ideological orientation. Thus a greater proportion of Americans,

compared to Yanomamo or Tiv, may actually experience romantic love. We suspect that this is the case. However, until this is substantiated through further field research, it remains only a hypothesis.

### CONCLUSION

The fact that we are able to document the occurrence of romantic love in 88.5 per cent of the sampled cultures stands in direct contradiction to the popular idea that romantic love is essentially limited to or the product of Western culture. Moreover, it suggests that romantic love constitutes a human universal, or at the least a near-universal.

The proposal that romantic love is a near-universal rests in part on subjective appraisal since there is no definitive boundary that marks near-universals. Brown (1991) suggests that a 95 per cent distribution might, by analogy with statistical tests of significance be a convenient marker of a near universal. Though our sample has less than a 95 per cent distribution of instances of romantic love, we have argued that the distribution is actually larger. We furthermore concur with a position stated by Brown (1991:44) that the distinction between universals and near-universals is often unimportant: "a near universal is universal enough."

If romantic love is a human universal, then it is important to explore its emic manifestations, within a variety of cultural settings. To date, this has seldom been done (Abu-Lughod 1986; Cancian 1987), thus our understanding of the cross-cultural variation in the styles of romantic expression is lacking.

At present there is no consensus concerning the relationship between cognition, emotion, and behavior. Romantic involvement is one sphere of human interaction that is in need of analysis. It is a project that will require the assistance of ethnographers who, in drawing a distinction between private experience and cultural expression of that experience, are able to enhance our understanding of the interplay between, on the one hand, the biopsychological factors that affect the perception of stimuli and, on the other, the culturally patterned attitudes that structure the framework for social action; thereby contributions will be made to anthropology's historical mission to study both the particular and the universal aspects of human experience.

### NOTES

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2. This definition is similar to the one used in previous studies which sought to account for the rise of romantic love as an ideological justification for marriage, is the standard definition used by psychologists in their study of romantic love.
3. Out of all possible 2x2 combinations, the only significant association found using the chi-square test ( $\alpha=.05$ ) was between Sub-Saharan Africa and East Eurasia. We believe that this association is anomalous, resulting from biases in the ethnographic literature rather than reflecting real-world events.

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