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Culture and Passionate Love

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Abstract

For more than 4,000 years, poets and storytellers have sung of the delights and sufferings of love and lust. This chapter reviews what scholars from various disciplines have discovered about the nature of passionate love and sexual desire. Anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists have assumed that passionate love is a cultural universal. Cultural researchers, historians, and social psychologists have emphasized the stunning diversity in the way passionate love and sexual desire have been viewed and experienced. Culture, ethnicity and the rules passed down by political and religious authorities have a profound impact on the way people think about and act out love and sex. Marriage for love and sex for pleasure have always been deeply threatening to political and religious leaders who have feared the individualistic implications of permissive approaches to romance and passion. Individualism and personal choice are seen as the enemies of order and authority; such freedom are deemed heretical, sinful, dangerous, and an invitation to chaos, selfishness, and anarchy. The fight over the rules governing love, marriage, divorce, and sex stands as one of history's central and most powerful themes. Today, however, in the era of widespread travel, global capitalism, and the World Wide Web, many of these traditional cross-cultural differences seem to be disappearing. Authority is giving way nearly everywhere to increased freedom, particularly in the personal realm, in the world of passion. Is the erosion of traditional authority and strict personal rules really happening—and if so what does that portend for personal and societal futures?

In all cultures, men and women feel the stirrings of passionate love and sexual desire. Yet despite its universality, culture has been found to have a profound impact on people's definitions of passionate love and on the way they think, feel, and behave when faced with appropriate partners in settings designed to spark such feelings. Cross-cultural studies provide a glimpse into the complex world of passionate love and increase our understanding of the extent to which people's emotional lives are written in their cultural and personal histories, as well as "writ in their genes."

Defining Passionate Love

The Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi, who was born in Afghanistan in 1207 A.D., contended, "whoever has been taught the secrets of love is sworn to silence with lips sealed." Nonetheless, Rumi penned ecstatic missives celebrating the glories of love (*Mathnavi* and *Diwan-I-Shams*). In this snippet, he rhapsodizes:

With love, bitter turns into sweetness.

With love, dregs turn into honey. . .

With love, thorns become flowers.

With love, vinegar becomes wine. . . .

With love, misery turns into happiness.

In all cultures, people distinguish between two kinds of love: "passionate love" and "companionate love." *Passionate love* (sometimes called "obsessive love," "infatuation," "lovesickness," or "being-in-love") is the variety of love with which we will be concerned in this paper. We will not discuss companionate love, a deeper, more intimate, and longer lasting variety of love and friendship.

Passionate 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, 2005, p. 71).

The *Passionate Love Scale (PLS)* was designed to tap into the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral indicants of such longings (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). The *PLS* has been translated and utilized by researchers in Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Korea, Peru, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. The *PLS* has been found to be a useful measure of passionate love with men and women of all ages, in a variety of cultures, and has been found to correlate well with certain well-defined patterns of neural activation (see Bartels & Zeki, 2000; Fisher, 2004; Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007; Hatfield & Rapson, 2009; Landis & O'Shea, 2000).

Theoretical Understandings of Passionate Love

Passionate Love: A Cultural Universal

Passionate love is as old as humankind. Love poems have been discovered on the outskirts of the Valley of Kings. Written during Egypt's New Kingdom (1539-1075 B.C.E.) but surely composed much earlier, these songs (recorded on cuneiform tablets) speak to lovers today. Consider this fragment:

The Flower Song

To hear your voice is pomegranate wine to me.

I draw life from hearing it.
 Could I see you with every glance,
 It would be better for me
 Than to eat or drink.²

Today, most cultural theorists consider passionate love to be a universal emotion, transcending culture and time (Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Jankowiak, 1995; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Jankowiak and Fischer (1992), for example, drew a sharp distinction between “romantic passion” and “simple lust.” They proposed that both passion and lust are universal feelings. Drawing on a sampling of tribal societies from the *Standard Cross-Cultural Sample*, they found that in almost all of these far-flung societies, young lovers talked about passionate love, recounted tales of love, sang love songs, and spoke of the longings and anguish of infatuation. When passionate affections clashed with parents’ or elders’ wishes, young couples often eloped. Cultural anthropologists have recorded folk conceptions of love in such diverse cultures as Indonesia, Morocco, Nigeria, the Fulbe of North Cameroun, the People’s Republic of China, Trinidad, Turkey, 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). A number of studies document that in both tribal and modern societies, people’s conceptions of passionate love are surprisingly similar (Neto et al., 2000).

Passionate Love: Cultural Differences

Americans are preoccupied with love—or so cross-cultural observers once claimed. In a famous quip, Linton (1936) mocked Americans for their naïve idealization of romantic love and their assumption that romantic love is a prerequisite for marriage:

All societies recognize that there are occasional violent, emotional attachments between persons of opposite sex, but our present American culture is practically the only one which has attempted to capitalize these, and make them the basis for marriage. . . . The hero of the modern American movie is always a romantic lover, just as the hero of the old Arab epic is always an epileptic. A cynic may suspect that in any ordinary population the percentage of individuals with a capacity for romantic love of the Hollywood type was about as large as that of persons able to throw genuine epileptic fits. (p. 175)

Throughout the world, a spate of commentators once echoed Linton’s claim that the idealization of passionate love is a peculiarly Western institution.

Background. The world’s cultures differ profoundly in the extent to which they emphasize individualism or collectivism (although many cultural researchers focus on related concepts such as independence vs. interdependence, modernism vs. traditionalism, urbanism vs. ruralism, affluence vs. poverty, or a family focus vs. an individualistic focus). Individualistic cultures such as the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, and the countries of 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 their personal interests to those of the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Triandis and his colleagues point out that in individualistic cultures, young people are allowed to “do their own thing.” In collectivist cultures, the group comes first.

Hsu (1953, 1985) and Doi (1963, 1973) contended that passionate love is a Western phenomenon, virtually unknown in China and Japan, and so incompatible with Asian values and customs that it is unlikely ever to gain a foothold among young Asians. Hsu (1953) wrote: “An

² Translated by M. V. Fox. http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/04/0416_040416_pyramidsongs.html

American asks, ‘How does my heart feel?’ A Chinese asks, ‘What will other people say?’” (p. 50). Hsu pointed out that the Chinese generally use the term “love” to describe not a respectable, socially sanctioned relationship, but an *illicit* liaison between a man and a woman. Chu (1985; Chu & Ju, 1993) also argued that although romantic love and compatibility are of paramount importance in mate selection in America, in China such feelings matter little. Traditionally, parents and go-betweens arranged young peoples’ marriages. Parents’ primary concern was not love and compatibility but *men dang hu dui*. Do the families possess the same social status? Are *they* compatible? Will the marriage bring some social or financial advantage to the two families? (A note: Later in this chapter, we will discuss the fact that since the 1950s, in the wake of globalization, Chinese attitudes and values have begun to undergo revolutionary changes.)

On the basis of such testimony, cross-cultural researchers once contended that romantic love is common only in modern, industrialized countries. It should be less valued in traditional cultures with strong, extended family ties (Simmons, Vom Kolke, & Shimizu, 1986). It should also be more common in modern, industrialized countries than in developing countries (Goode, 1959; Rosenblatt, 1967). In recent years, cultural researchers have begun to test these provocative hypotheses.

Recent Research on Culture and Passionate Love

Recently, cultural researchers have begun to investigate the impact of culture on people’s definitions of love, 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 a few cultural differences do in fact exist, cultures frequently turn out to be more similar in their profoundest of feelings than one might expect. Let us now turn to this research.

The Meaning of Passionate Love

Shaver, Wu, and Schwartz (1991) interviewed young people in America, Italy, and the People’s Republic of China about the way they viewed love. They found that Americans and Italians tended to equate love with happiness and to assume that both passionate and companionate love were intensely pleasurable experiences. Students in Beijing, China, possessed a 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 ideographic words such as infatuation, unrequited love, nostalgia, and sorrow love. Other cultural researchers agree that cultural values may, indeed, have a profound impact on the subtle shadings of meaning assigned to the construct of “love” (Cohen, 2001; Kim & Hatfield, 2004; Kitayama, 2002; Luciano, 2003; Nisbet, 2003; Oyserman, Kimmelmeier, & Coon, 2002; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). A few cultural researchers argue, for example, that romantic love is more important in modern, industrialized, individualistic cultures (Levine et al., 1995), in Latin cultures (Ferrer Pérez et al., 2008), and in European cultures than in Asian or Indian samples (Simmons et al., 1986, 1988; Medora et al., 2002), or in societies where men and women possess sexual equality (DeMunck & Korotayev, 1999).

There is, however, considerable debate as to how important such differences are. When social psychologists explored folk conceptions of love in a variety of cultures—including the People’s Republic of China, Indonesia, Micronesia, Palau, and Turkey, as well as a variety of other nations—they concluded that people in the various cultures possessed surprisingly similar views of love and other “feelings of the heart” (for a review of this research, see Contreas et al., 1996; Fischer, Wang, Kennedy, & Cheng, 1998; Jankowiak, 1995; Kim & Hatfield, 2004; Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001; Xu et al., 2008). In a typical study, for example, Shaver and his

colleagues (2001) argued that love and sexual mating, reproduction, and parenting are fundamental issues for all humans (pp. 219-220). To test the notion that passionate and companionate love are cultural universals, they conducted a “prototype” study to determine (1) what Indonesian (compared to American) men and women considered to be “basic” emotions, and (2) the meaning they ascribed to these emotions. Starting with 404 Indonesian *perasaan hati* (emotion names or “feelings of the heart”) they asked people to sort the words into basic emotion categories. As predicted, the Indonesians came up with the same five emotions that Americans consider to be basic: joy, love, sadness, fear, and anger. Furthermore, when asked about the meanings of “love,” Indonesian men and women (like their American counterparts) were able to distinguish passionate love (*asmara*, or sexual/desire/arousal) from companionate love (*cinta*, or affection/liking/fondness). There were a few differences in the American and Indonesian lexicons, however:

The Indonesian conception of love may place more emphasis on yearning and desire than the American conception, perhaps because the barriers to consummation are more formidable in Indonesia, which is a more traditional and mostly Muslim country (p. 219).

Why are these diverse societies so similar in their views of love? Perhaps love is indeed a cultural universal. Or perhaps the times they are “a-changin’”. One impact of globalization (and the ubiquitous MTV, Hollywood and Bollywood movies, chat rooms, and foreign travel) may be to ensure that when people throughout the world speak of “passionate love,” they may well be talking about much the same thing. We would argue that culture and historical pressures produce visions of passionate love that are variations on a theme. Shading, melody, and tempo may vary with culture, but the underlying architecture of the mind may remain the same. Cultural traditions and values may affect romantic visions, how one describes one’s feelings when in love, how demonstrative people are in displaying their love, but the fact of passionate love may indeed be a cultural universal based on similarities in the architecture of the mind and a common neural substrate (Aron et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2008).

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 whereas American men and women would be most vulnerable to love, the Japanese would be the least likely to be “love besotted.” The authors found that 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 women to be in love. (In America, 53% of men and 63% of women; in Russia, 61% of men and 71% of women; and in Japan, 41% of men and 63% of women indicated they were currently in love.) There was no evidence, however, that individualistic cultures breed young men and women who are more love struck than do collectivist societies.

Surveys of Mexican-American, Chinese-American, and European-American students have revealed 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 et al., 1994; Hatfield & Rapson, 2005).

The Intensity of Passionate Love

Cultures also seem to share more similarities than differences in the *intensity* of passionate love that people experience. In one study, Hatfield and Rapson (2005) asked men and women of European, Filipino, and Japanese ancestry to complete the *PLS*. To their surprise, they found that men and women from the various ethnic groups seemed to love with equal passion. (In the

following table 1, none of the ethnic group differences nor any of the gender x ethnic group differences were significant.)

Table 1

PLS Scores of Various Ethnic Groups

	Men	Women
Caucasians (in Hawaii)	100.50	105.00
Caucasians (mainland USA)	97.50	110.25
Filipinos	106.05	102.90
Japanese	99.00	103.95

Hatfield and Rapson's (2005) results were confirmed in a study done by Doherty and his colleagues (1994) with European-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Filipino-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

After viewing the preceding results, some cultural researchers observed: "True, people might fall in love, but they don't expect to have these desires indulged. When it comes to marriage, in family focused societies people sacrifice their own desires, and accede to the wishes of parents, authorities, and friends."

To test this notion, Sprecher and her colleagues (1994), asked American, Russian, and Japanese students: "If a person had all the other qualities you desired, would you marry him or her if you were not in love?" (Students could answer only "yes" or "no.") The authors assumed that only Americans would demand love *and* marriage; they predicted that both the Russians and the Japanese would be more practical. They were wrong! Both the Americans and the Japanese were romantics. Few of them would consider marrying someone they did not love (only 11% of Americans and 18% of the Japanese said "yes"). The Russians were more practical; 37% said they would accept such a proposal. (These ethnic group differences were significant at the $p < .001$ level.) Russian *men* were only slightly more practical than men in other countries. It was the Russian *women* who were most likely to "settle." (This gender difference was significant at $p < .05$).

Despite the larger proportion of Russian women willing to enter a loveless marriage, a large majority of individuals in the three cultures would refuse to marry someone they did not love (see Table 2).

Table 2

Would You Marry Someone You Did Not Love?

	Yes	No
American men	13%	87%
American women	9%	91%
Russian men	30%	70%
Russian women	41%	59%
Japanese men	20%	80%
Japanese women	19%	81%

For additional information on culture, love and sex, see Boratav (2008); Gabreyna (2008); Gabreyna & Fehir, 2008; Levine et al., 1995; Ryder, Pfaus & Brotto (2008); Schmitz (2008)—several of whose work are represented in this volume.

In Conclusion

The preceding studies, then, suggest that (in the area of passionate love and sexual desire) the large differences that once existed between Westernized, modern, urban, industrial societies and Eastern, modern, urban industrial societies may be fast disappearing. Those interested in cross-cultural differences may be forced to search for large differences in only the most underdeveloped, developing, and collectivist of societies—such as in Africa or Latin America, in China or the Arab countries (Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi-Arabia, Iraq, or the United Arab Emirates).

However, it may well be that even there, the winds of Westernization, individualism, and social change are blowing. 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 Australian aboriginal people of Mangrove and a Copper Inuit Alaskan Indian tribe (see Jankowiak, 1995, for an extensive review of this research).

Naturally, cultural differences still exert a profound influence on young people’s attitudes, emotions, and behavior, and such differences are not likely to disappear in our lifetime. In Morocco, for example, marriage was once an alliance between families (as historically it was in most of the world before the 18th century), in which children had little or no say. Today, although parents can no longer simply dictate whom their children will marry, parental approval remains critically important. It is important, however, that young men and women are at least allowed to have their say (see Davis & Davis, 1995).

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. To some extent, the world’s citizens may be becoming one but in truth the delightful and divisive cultural variations that have made our world 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 the modern era, but tradition can be tenacious, and the global future of passionate love cannot be predicted with any certainty.

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