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*Published in:*

International Journal of Emotional Education

Julkaistu: 01.01.2017

*Document Version*

Julkaistu PDF-muodossa, tunnetaan myös nimellä tietueversio

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Mattila, J., Uusiautti, S., & Määttä, K. (2017). How do people with intellectual disability describe the experience of falling in love? *International Journal of Emotional Education*, 9(1), 71-84.

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## How do people with intellectual disability describe the experience of falling in love?

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The phenomenon of falling in love among people with intellectual disability has not received much attention in research. In this study, seven Finnish young adults (5 women and 2 men) with mild intellectual disability (ID) were asked about their experiences of falling in love. They were interviewed with a qualitative themed interview method. The data were analyzed with content analysis by searching the participants' descriptions of partner selection, the event of falling in love, and how falling in love has changed their lives. The study showed that that young adults with ID were familiar with and able to describe falling in love concretely and in a very positive manner. Love was seen as an important part of well-being. The findings suggest that people who live or work with young adults with ID should be prepared to support them in various phases of love in a way that enhances their cognitive love skills and self-determination in intimate relationships.

**Keywords:** intellectual disability, falling in love, love, relationships

First submission 4<sup>th</sup> March 2016; Accepted for publication 24<sup>th</sup> August 2016

### Introduction

The first experiences of love in adolescence are often fascinating, captivating, and total (Riela et al., 2010). Falling in love is a special experience to young adults who are learning about life in a romantic relationship (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013a). Love includes the whole scale of emotions all the way from anxiety and despair to fascination and pleasure (Bauminger et al., 2008; Person, 2007). Still, the way people perceive love is based on the models, stories, rules, and rituals that are transmitted to them from previous generations. These

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also vary by context. In other words, we are taught what love is and how to show it (Fonagy et al., 2002; Sternberg, 1998).

In this article, we will introduce findings from a unique empirical research focused on the experiences of love in young adults with intellectual disability (ID). Their experiences of love have been less studied (see also Lee & Oh, 2013). Instead, studies have focused merely on their right to build relationships (Shaman, 1978; Ward, Atkinson, Smith, & Windsor, 2013), the features of their relationships (Koller, Richardson, & Katz, 1988), and their general acceptance (Aunos & Feldman, 2002; Oliver, Anthony, Leimkuhl, & Skillman, 2002). In addition, studies have focused on the capabilities of people with ID as parents and attitudes toward them as parents (Feldman & Walton-Allen, 2002; Heller, Hsieh, & Rowitz, 1997; McGaw, Scully, & Pritchard, 2010).

*What does falling in love mean and consist of?*

*Definitions.* In scientific discussion, the event of falling in love has been characterized in many different ways, both positively and negatively (Alberon, 1979; Fromm, 1956; Girard, 1972; Tennov, 1979; see also Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012; 2013a). The phenomenon was, indeed, perceived scary and uncontrollable, similar to neurosis (Askew, 1965) or anti-social behavior (Kilpatrick, 1974). On the other hand, Stendahl (in 1830/1957) described falling in love as crystallizing, and Irigaray (1982) equated it with immortality and holiness. Erich Fromm (1956) considered love as an active power that connects people with each other and provides the sense of unity and security. Obviously, falling in love cannot be described with just one word; it is a process that cannot be fully described by words, nor is it possible to explain it just from one perspective. Love is connected with feelings of love, action, and knowledge and skills (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2014; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2012). As a combination of these elements, love appears differently to everyone and makes a multidimensional experience. Due to its individualistic, unique, and experience-based nature, the event of falling in love should thus not be categorized too strictly.

*How Does Falling in Love Proceed?.* Falling in love can be a powerful emotional whirlwind including joy and happiness, excitement and pleasure, but also insecurity and the fear of losing love (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013a). Love can be based on friendships—or it can start with passion (Pines, 1999). Numerous phased descriptions of the origin of love, the phases of falling in love, and its stages have been created. Braiker and Kelley (1979) have noted that a love affair develops in four phases from casual dating, to serious dating, engagement, and marriage. Each of these phases consist of four dimensions of love, conflict, maintenance, and ambivalence.

Goldstine et al.'s (1977) three phases of a love affair is a very well-known classification. It starts with falling in love, with the partners feeling passion, tension, insecurity, and vulnerability. Typically partners feel high self-respect and reciprocity as well as idealization during this phase. The first crisis after falling in love happens in the second phase which is called the period of disappointment and alienation (Goldstine et al., 1977). During this phase, the partners realize that they are separate people from each other who might have different opinions and interests. According to Goldstine et al. (1977), the probability of breaking up is at its highest at this stage. But if their love develops, they will continue to the next step where the expectations of

each other become more realistic. The partners experience powerful appreciation of individuality but security as well. According to this theory, love develops from romantic, passionate love into a realistic and more companionable form (see also Walster & Walster, 1978) that can also be described as ‘mature’ love (Hatfield, 1988). Reaching this phase means that the partners manage to overcome the period of unwelcome emotions.

There are numerous other illustrations of the phases of love, too. For example, Tzeng (1992) has specified the development of love by eight stages (the Octagonal Stage Model), Coleman (1977) have introduced a five-step model, and Levinger (1979) a five stages ABCDE-model (Acquaintance, Buildup, Continuation, Deterioration, Ending). In sum, romantic love is seen as a linear process, with the couple falling in love, loving each other, and either losing or deepening love. In this perspective, the very first love is quite special through its emotional and learning experience; and, usually, takes place in adolescence. Falling in love and starting a relationship are always learning experiences through which people will have to mold their identities and practice new kinds of relationship skills. This article concentrates on a little studied theme: the phenomenon of falling in love as described by young adults with ID. The purpose of this study was to find out how people with ID understand and describe love, and especially the phase of falling in love.

## Method

Seven Finnish young adults with ID (5 women and 2 men) aged between 18 and 31 years were recruited in the study. They are referred to with codes W1, W2, W3, W4, W5, M1, and M2, where the letter ‘W’ means a woman and ‘M’ a man. Each participant was diagnosed with mild ID, and they were considered capable of participating in the study and describing their views and opinions about love. Intellectual disability is usually categorized into four levels, namely mild, moderate, severe, and profound. Often, medical literature uses two-level division of mild and severe intellectual disability. In the latter case, IQ is less than 50, while an IQ of 50–69 is related with mild ID. However, this definition tells only one side of intellectual disability as it does not tell much about a person’s adaptive functioning. The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM 5, 2013) defines ID in terms of adaptive functioning, which tells more about the level of support the person needs than IQ.

In order to explore the young adults’ perceptions of love, their own opinions and possible experiences, interview was considered the most appropriate method (see also Booth & Booth, 1994). The participants recruited in this study had relatively good interaction skills, which was considered as the primary condition for participating in the study. Each of them received a consent form that included a short introduction of the study and its purposes and methods. All those who were invited to participate in the study, accepted the invitation with great interest and enthusiasm.

The interview consisted of two main themes: falling in love and the love experience. In this study, it was crucial to compile an interview guide that would serve the purposes of the study but that would be accessible to the participants. Every participant answered the same open-ended, questions. The purpose of the open-ended questions was to have the participants describe their experiences and perceptions freely and explain their own viewpoints and opinions. If necessary, the researcher changed the order of questions during

the interview. Furthermore, a question was rephrased if the interviewee did not understand it. Supplementary questions were also asked when considered necessary.

Reliability-wise, it is important to point out that the participants were willing and able to share their views in the research interview. The impression in the interviews was that the young adults with ID talked openly and honestly as far as their ability to describe the phenomenon in words made it possible (Booth & Booth, 1994; Finlay & Lyons, 2001).

Naturally it is worth discussing to what extent the participants' hopes and dreams were mixed with their actual experiences. Their intellectual disability also had to be taken into consideration when planning and conducting the interviews (Knopp Biklen & Moseley, 1988; McDonald, Keys, & Henry, 2008). Heal and Sigelman (1995) emphasize that the validity of an interview with participants with limited intelligence depends greatly on the format of the interview questions. In addition, the way the interview was conducted paid attention to the problem of acquiescence in quality-of-life interviews with people with ID (Matikka & Vesala, 1997; Finlay & Lyons, 2002). Strategies made use of to this effect, included the use of open-ended questions, allowing the participants to use their own words and giving them time to answer. Indeed, describing such an overwhelming experience as falling in love, is difficult to anyone. The interaction and communication skills of people with ID are tested especially when they are asked to discuss themes that they do not usually talk about or have no previous experience of, or that they find difficult to perceive (Freedman, 2001). However, the interview method seemed to be an effective way to reach the participants' authentic voices (Booth & Booth, 1994).

The data were analyzed with theory-led qualitative content analysis so that earlier theories about falling in love were used as the basis of analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). The analysis focused on the descriptions of partner selection, the beginning of falling in love, the experience of falling in love, and the effects that falling in love have in one's life. The data were obtained and analyzed so that the anonymity of the participants was secured. As the number of interviewees was low, it was considered reasonable not to reveal further personal information except their gender.

## **Results**

### *With whom do you fall in love?*

Four of the seven interviewees mentioned that appearance was one of the criteria in partner selection. According to them, it would be good to have a partner who was, for example, good-looking, pretty, or handsome. However, none of them considered looks as the only determining feature in partner selection but everyone mentioned also other qualities, such as doing things together and similar interests; most also mentioned shared time and experiences. Indeed, one of the young adults had met her partner during leisure activities:

Well, we like soccer and exercising... and both of us play in a soccer team. So, that's where I found Matti. (W4)

I would like him to be someone sportive... and that he would like the same things I do [...] that he would like to do sports and so on - - we could go to gym together and do something else together too, so that we wouldn't have our own activities that we do without the other all the time. (W2)

The young adults with ID in this study also looked for similar features that they share with their partners and they wished that the partners would share their interests. In other words, they wanted to share their lives with a loved one, which was considered important and a natural element of the relationship.

The third feature mentioned in the interviews was intimacy. A dream partner was described with words such as tender, romantic, and kind. These features were also described as concrete acts and skills that the partner should express in their relationship:

I would like to have a dream partner...he would be...well, good at massaging. --- Mmm... just hoping that he would do a lot of meals for me and would cuddle me. (W1)

### *Where does falling in love begin?*

The interviewees found it difficult to define any clear starting point or situation for falling in love. They were not able to describe how or in what situation they had noticed that they had fell in love. Yet, the majority of them could define that falling in love was their personal feeling, a sensation.

"I'm not able to explain it to you, really [smiles shyly]. It feels good." (W2)

Well I just had a feeling that I love her. I just feel that I love, more and more, I love... (M1)

Some of the interviewees described falling in love as physiological changes. They had noticed that when the person they had fell in love with was near, they had physical reactions, such as blushing and heart beating faster:

Falling in love gives you such a good feeling... and you feel good [...] Yes, and then your heart can be beating. (W5)

At least, you feel it here [places her hand on her chest where heart is] (W3)

### *How Does Falling in Love Feel Like?*

In the interviews, all of the young adults with ID described falling in love as a positive and benign feeling. They did not mention any negative effects even when they were asked about them. The feeling of falling in love was pleasant and nice:

Sweet... and a little bit different [...] It is different than being just friends. (W2)

The feeling of falling in love could perhaps be described as joyful or enamored. (M2)

Many of the interviewees did, indeed, mention that falling in love was somehow a different or even confusing feeling. The state was so overwhelming that it was impossible to describe by words:

At first it was like my socks were rolling on feet... [laughs] I mean, at the beginning. But now it has subsided. But surely, the feeling is there all the time. (W4)

#### *How Does Falling in Love Manifest Itself?*

When the interviewees were asked to describe how they identified the feeling of falling in love, their opinions seemed to differ from each other. While some reported that falling in love affects your feelings and, therefore, appears concretely as a happy mood, some others could not say how falling in love manifests itself. Some participants described that their own presence or behavior toward others change when falling in love. In all, their viewpoints differed and showed that falling in love was perceived in many ways from the everyday life perspective.

Changes in oneself were considered positive. They were associated with good mood and feelings, and with balance in life. In addition, the partner's presence was considered important to one's well-being.

You have a sort of calm feeling [...] and you miss him, even if he is there, nearby. (W5)

Well, at least, I behave properly [when I am in love] (W3)

It was interesting that one of the interviewees described changes in behavior. According to him, the change was due to his new relationship status and commitment to the relationship. He considered commitment important and it was necessary to show to others, too, for example to avoid misinterpretation:

I had to choose one girl to date with, the one I love right now [...] Well, if another girl falls in love with me, I have to tell her that I already have chosen one, that I have selected a woman. (M1)

#### *How Does Falling in Love Affect Your Life?*

All interviewees reported that falling in love had affected their lives somehow. However, the young adults were not quite sure or could not define this change in their lives in actual practice. Some of them found it overwhelming to even try to describe the influence and repeated just that love has a great power. Some participants did their best to describe how falling in love has affected or is affecting them and their lives. Spending time together and doing things together were the most important effects. In other words, falling in love was perceived as a turning point from being alone to being together:

Perhaps my life has changed a little... If you like each other, it is a little bit different in my opinion [...] well, then you do more things with the other than what you do alone. (W2)

For example, I went to lunch with my girlfriend, candlelight dinner, or something [...] we would be together all the time. (M2)

All participants were of the opinion that falling in love had only positive effects. They talked about falling in love with warmth and even longing, considering it as a positive influence on their mental and physical well-being. One's life seemed better when in love or being a target of someone's love.

At least, that falling in love feels good! (W3)

Life has become steadier [...] I have calmed down. Let's say that even he [the boyfriend] was my first one and I haven't dated anyone else, you know when someone really cares, like he does. (W4)

## **Discussion**

This study showed that people with intellectual disability have many thoughts, feelings and experiences of falling in love and being in love. Their appreciation of a partner was mostly described by referring to a dream partner. Three main themes could be found in these partner selection depictions, namely looks (McClintock, 2011), shared interests and activities (Jonason, Webster, & Gesselman, 2013), and intimacy and empathy skills (Chappell & Davis, 1998). When it came to the partners' looks, they should be attractive; handsome, pretty, or beautiful (e.g., Townsend & Levy, 1990). Thus, appearance was appreciated as one important feature in the partner, especially at the phase of partner selection (Chambers, Christiansen, & Kunz, 1983). Another partner selection process (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013a) was similarity-based selection (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004). The interviewees appreciated it that the partner was interested in the same hobbies and activities, and that they could spend time together (Montoya, Horton, & Kirschner, 2008). Similarity was also regarded as an important part of communication (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013b) because it helped mutual understanding (Aunos & Feldman, 2002; Lee & Oh, 2013). Intimacy and caring were described as tenderness and gentleness, but also as practical acts that could be seen romantic, such as candlelight dinners and massages. Being together was seen pleasant and desirable, and the young adults with ID could also describe their own meaning and role in it (Weiser & Weigel, 2016). The impression is that perhaps the criteria of partner selection may be too high. On the other hand, the young adults did not mention any criteria to exclude undesirable partner candidates. Their answers emphasized the wish of getting support and being able to share their everyday lives. Perhaps, these viewpoints reflect the fundamental values in partner selection (Kelly & Dupasquier, 2016).

The meaning of falling in love was perceived as a multidimensional, primarily positive part of life. Negative sides of love were not mentioned nor was the significance of love questioned. However, falling in love was not described with exaltation or clichés. Although the meaning of falling in love and the basis of partner selection were relatively well discussed in the interviews, the young adults were not able to recall exactly or define specifically how falling in love happened. 'It just happened' describes best their answers. When some of the interviewees tried their best in describing the event of falling in love, they talked about their emotions: they could feel love inside, which was solely a positive feeling.

Falling in love as an emotion appeared an important part of research participants' lives. It introduced many positive sensations and even balanced their being and life (Jamison & Proulx, 2013). This might also suggest the fulfillment of their need for security and development in self-esteem which both can be



strengthened by another person's presence and support. From this perspective, falling in love can have many long-term effects that are important to well-being (Etcheverry, Le, Wu, & Wei, 2013). Indeed, the participants perceived falling in love as a significant landmark that showed the way in life together with a loved one and without loneliness (Karantzas, Feeney, Goncalves, & McCabe, 2014).

Finally, the participants found it difficult to describe how falling in love manifests itself. Some notions, such as changes in one's behavior or conscious commitment to relationship were reported, but it was generally perceived as a holistic sense of well-being. Love brought safety, intimacy, balance, and peace in life and these effects were mentioned to increase happiness and good mood remarkably.

### *Recommendations for practice*

This study contributed unique information about how people with intellectual disability understand, describe, and experience one of the most beautiful phenomena in human life, namely falling in love. However, their positive attitudes and expectations can also become sources of disappointment. If one is not aware of or able to recognize the crises related to falling in love and relationships (Acavedo & Aron, 2009; Person, 2007; Riela et al., 2010; Thompson, 2008), surpassing them can become overwhelming. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that people with ID need support in their social relationships as they might not be able to maintain them just by themselves (Lunsky & Benson, 2001). However, the findings of this study also give reason to critically analyze the self-perceptions of young adults with ID (McDonald, Keys, & Henry, 2008).

Given the lower cognitive ability of people with intellectual disability, we will now discuss the crises and changes that follow the phase of falling in love. According to Määttä and Uusiautti (2014; see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2012), love necessitates certain cognitive abilities (skills and knowledge) that are especially important when the initial fascination fades (Canary & Dainton, 2003) and the couple moves from falling in love toward actual love in their shared everyday life. Firstly, the early phase of falling in love is temporal and, therefore, no one can avoid crises or changes. Gradually, the couple has to start the so-called normal life, when new expectations about the partner start to emerge. Bergman (1995) and Gordon (2008) talk about "the dark sides" of falling in love, such as jealousy, possessiveness and excessive dependency (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1973). Peele (1988) refers to "lovesickness" to describe how difficult it might be to realize that the sense of falling in love has disappeared before the value of lasting love is perceived and understood.

Secondly, the changes involve feelings of disappointment, helplessness, and insecurity (Bergman, 1995; Gordon, 2008). Määttä and Uusiautti (2013a) have categorized these into five themes, namely the difficulty of facing and accepting the reality (Foehrenbach & Lane, 1994), the paradox of being alone and together (Fenchel, 1998; Person, 2007; Sperling, 1987), balancing between separateness and proximity (Mahler, 1974), love addiction and dependency (Capell-Sowder, 1994), and the difficulty of one's own autonomy, loneliness, and individuality (Foehrenbach & Lane, 1994; Sperling, 1987). It is important to support people with ID in their relationships by providing guidance at the moment of the flush of love and during disappointments and crises that inevitably occur in intimate relationships (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

As an emotional phenomenon, falling in love is located between the experiences of extreme pleasure and the deepest distress and disappointments—in a way that many have not experienced before (Keyley & Seery, 2011).

Working with people with ID requires sensitivity (Dubbs & Buunk, 2010), and young adults with ID cannot be guided and supported if they are not willing to receive help or ready or able to think over their own situation (Freeman & Brown, 2001). Love relationships among people with ID arouse a number of questions, and those who support them need to reflect on their own attitudes, for example, toward love between people with ID (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2004), love between a person with ID and an intellectually normal person (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989), and sexuality in people with ID (Cuskelly & Bryde, 2004; Kijak, 2011; Rushbrook, Murray, and Townsend, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This study highlighted the importance and value of listening to the voices of adults with ID about their aspirations and experiences related to love. We acknowledge however, that this was a small scale study exploring the views of seven adults with ID. We have also highlighted earlier on the challenges in interviewing people with ID. Although the participants described their views openly, such an abstract concept of falling in love was considered rather difficult to describe. More research on the experiences of romantic relationships should be conducted among people with ID to better understand and support their ability to love and develop as partners in romantic relationships. Such research could include, for example, longitudinal studies and wider interview studies among couples with ID as well as research on couple interaction in people with ID.

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