

LOVE IN ADULTHOOD: BELIEFS VS. EXPERIENCE

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What I'd like to do for the next few minutes is to talk to you about some research we did at the Andrus Gerontology Center at USC on the nature of love between men and women. We decided to examine what love is in two ways. First, we looked at what peoples' ideas or beliefs were about love and asked if these ideas changed as people got older. We also looked at how people actually experienced love and asked if these experiences changed over time. How important to beliefs about love and to actual love experiences is it to be a great romantic? A Romeo or a Juliet? How important to be physically passionate? An Elizabeth Taylor or a Richard Burton? Does the importance of passion and romance change with age?

Our predictions came from developmental and social psychological theory. Developmental theorists say that love relationships become less romantic and less physically passionate as people get older. Hobart (1958) called it "disillusionment", Pineo (1963) called it "disenchantment". In any case, the fireworks are supposed to fade and the relationship is supposed to mellow. People are supposed to become more realistic and practical about love. Cognitive dissonance theorists would predict that this shift from romantic to realistic should occur both in terms of peoples' beliefs about love and their actual love experiences. In theory, people should be consistent about what love is. Together these theories led us to predict that romance and passion would be less important to both the love beliefs as well as the actual love experiences of older lovers compared to younger lovers. In terms of our everyday stereotypes about young and aged love, these predictions seemed reasonable.

Before I finish today, I hope to leave you convinced that psychological research does not always support the "obvious" or its own theories. Our exploratory research

produced two unexpected findings. I hope you will remember them because they contradict conventional wisdom. First, we found that being older does not mean giving up sex or romantic notions of love. Second, we found that peoples' experiences and beliefs about love aren't consistent. We found that at any age, people are romantic, believing that true love is eternal and can make everything perfect. At the same time, they are not idealistic about their own actual love relationship. They are aware of real love's bruises and blemishes.

So, how did we find this? What did we do? Briefly, we conducted a study on the nature of love experiences and beliefs in adulthood. The study involved twelve married and twelve unmarried couples from four age groups (adolescent, young adult, middle aged adult and older adult), who had been judged to have healthy love relationships and to be "very much in love". To look at their love experiences, we had our subjects sort a set of 144 statements rating each statement in terms of how well it described their current love relationship -- did it describe it alot or not at all? These statements had been previously classified by judges into six categories, reflecting six different components of the love experience. Now, take a look at Table 1. You can see that the categories were: (1) Affective, the warm type of love, caring affection; (2) Cognitive, the thinking kind of love; (3) Behavioral, how do they act with each other, what do they do together?; (4) Verbal, how do they communicate, Are they honest with each other?; (5) Physical, the sexual and passionate kind of love; and (6) Fantasy, the idealistic and romantic kind of loving, Does he see her as his sleeping beauty? Does she see him as a knight in shining armour? There were a lot of other ways we could have categorized love, but these seemed to best summarize the conceptions of love offered in the historical and empirical literature. To look at their beliefs about love, we had subjects fill out a 29-item Attitudes Toward Love questionnaire. They indicated on a seven-point scale how much they agreed or disagreed with statements like: "For me, true love is eternal." "Love involves calm rather than exciting feelings." "Love comes only once in a life time." Here, our idea was to see how romantic or realistic people were in their general concepts about love.

So, what were the results? There were two important findings, not to mention the finding that it is extremely difficult to find people who are really in love. The first finding was that age makes a difference in peoples' actual love experiences. When we did an analysis of variance, we found significant age differences in the experience of love. If you will look at Figure 1, the mean scores for the various components of love are plotted in relation to age. Two components were found to be significantly related to age. The first was the physical component, shown as the P in the figure. As you can see, the physical component was the most important aspect of love for the first three age groups. But look what happens to this component for the older adults. It drops dramatically in importance in describing their love relationships. The second component found to be related to age was the fantasy component, shown as the F in the figure. As you can see, the tendency to idealize was the least important aspect for all age groups, although it was more characteristic of love for the adolescents and older adults. Let's assume that these results show developmental changes rather than generational differences. If they do, they suggest that (1) physical passion does become less important to love, but not until late in life and (2) at any age, lovers are not idealistic about their own relationship, although the adolescents and the older are more idealistic.

I said there were two important findings that came out of the research. The first we've talked about. That age makes a difference in peoples' actual love experiences. The second is that age makes no difference in peoples' general beliefs about love. When we did an analysis of variance of the Attitudes Toward Love scale, there was no significant effect for age. And, when we looked at the mean scores for the age groups, we found that all age groups were romantic, rather than realistic, in their concept of love. Interestingly, we found a significant marital status X sex interaction for beliefs about love. Now if you will look at Figure 2, you can see the mean scores on the Attitude Scale for married and unmarried men and women. As you can see, unmarried men were significantly more romantic than unmarried women, whereas just the reverse tended to be true for the married. The implication is that, at any age,

single women have more practical expectations about love and the marriage marketplace, whereas singlehood is a man's game and he can afford to play and be more romantic. However, in marriage, responsibility and reality may hit the man the hardest whereas the married women may become freer to be the romantic.

So, those are the findings. Now, how do they tie in to our original predictions? Well, the findings partially agree with the predictions from developmental theory that time has a corrosive effect on romance and passion in relationships. Age did make physical passion less important to love experiences, but not until late in life. Why might passion be less important to older adults? General slowing of the nervous system, decreased physical vigor and strength, and conformity to the asexual stereotype of the aged are possible reasons. Contrary to developmental predictions, age was not accompanied by a more realistic view of love. All age groups were equally romantic in their beliefs about love. As for their love experiences, older adults were actually more idealistic than young and middle aged adults, and as idealistic as adolescents. Why might this be so? One explanation is that the youngest and oldest age groups are not bound to reality by the responsibilities of parenting and careers as are people in their young and middle adult years. The very young and the old may be freer to be romantic and idealistic.

The findings so not fit either with the prediction from cognitive dissonance theory that contented lovers should have a concept of love consistent with their actual experiences. Our happy lovers were not consistent. At any age, they had a romantic concept of love. At the same time, they were not idealistic about their own relationship. This duality between happy lovers' romantic beliefs and non-romantic experiences raises some intriguing questions. This inconsistency between beliefs and experiences should be stressful. It should be hard on a person to believe that love makes everything O.K. while realizing that everything is not O.K. in his own love relationship. How is it that happy lovers can live this this inconsistency? Is this what makes them different from unhappy lovers? Is there some strategy happy lovers use to reconcile the lack of fit? Do unhappy lovers use different strategies? What are some possible strategies? One strategy might be to

fantasize about non-existent relationships -- the attractive, but nameless, man or women who passes by you on the street. Another might be to enjoy hearing about the romantic adventures of friends. Still another might be to have your own short-term hot and heavy love affair. A last question is, are there some coping strategies which are more effective than others in promoting the growth and development of healthy and happy love relationships over the adult life span?

In the end, I think that this research poses more questions than answers. But, what I hope I've done is to show that our exploratory study on the nature of love does not fit with our theory or conventional wisdom on the topic. We found, contrary to our expectations, that age does not seem to make happy lovers less romantic and that people do not keep their general ideas about love consistent with their actual experiences.

Hobart, C. W. Disillusionment in marriage and romanticism. Marriage and Family Living, 1958, 20, 156-162.

Neiswender, M. E. Age differences in the experience of love in adult men and women. Unpublished masters thesis, University of Southern California, 1975.

Pineo, P. C. Disengagement in the later years of marriage. In M. B. Sussman (Ed.), Sourcebook in Marriage and the Family, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.

TABLE 1

Summary of Content of Categories
for Six Components of Love

Component of Love	Summary of Content	Sample Statement
AFFECTIVE	Affectionate feelings Emotional intimacy	"I feel complete because of him."
COGNITIVE	Psychological intimacy Respect Understanding	"We share common goals for our lives."
BEHAVIORAL	Affiliative and dependency behaviors	"We spend a great deal of time together."
VERBAL	Honest communication Self-disclosure	"He finds it easy to confide in me."
PHYSICAL	Physical and sexual intimacy, excitement &/or tenderness	"We enjoy sex together and even crave it."
FANTASY	Idealistic, wishful notions about love	"The future is sure to be perfect as long as we are together."

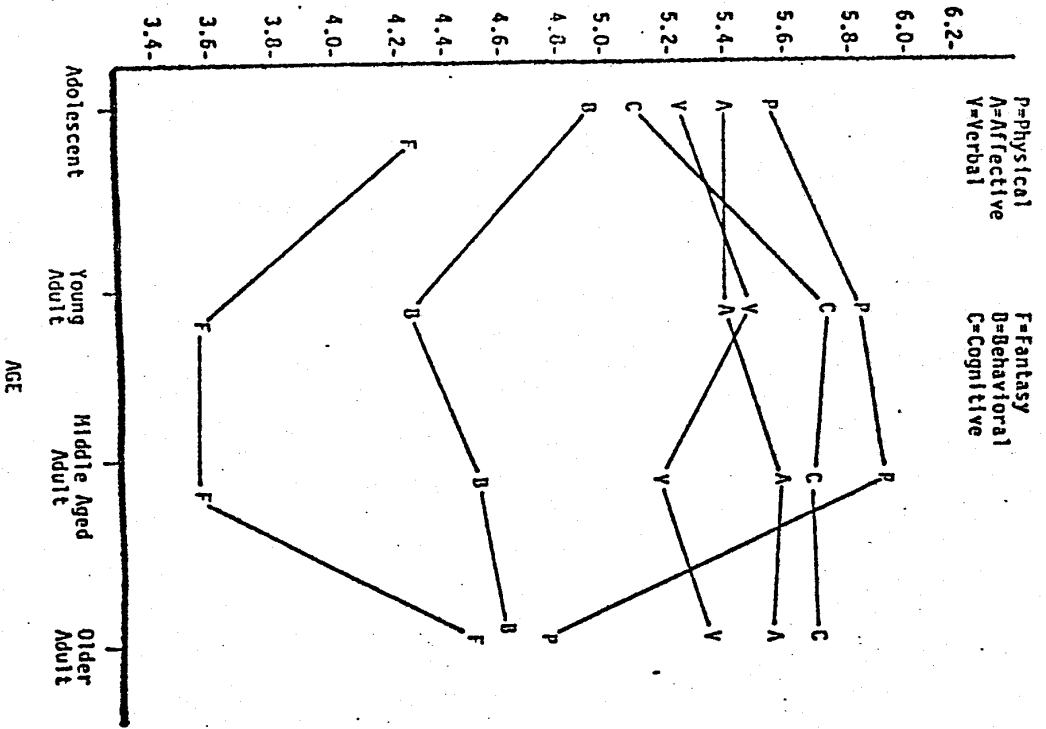


Figure 1
 Mean Scores by Age for Component of Love

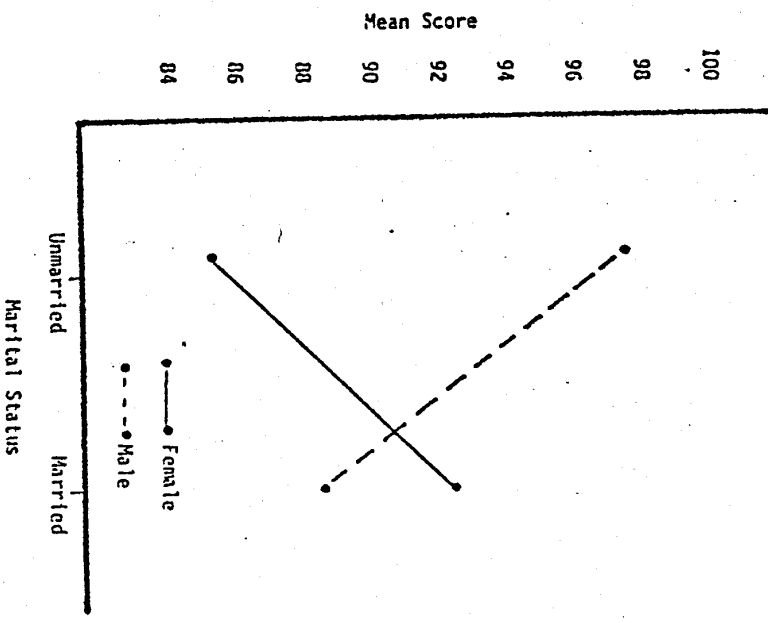


Figure 2
 Mean Scores on Attitudes Toward Love Scale for Unmarried and Married Men and Women

Note. The higher the score, the more "romantic" the attitude toward love.