The Sociology of Love, Courtship, and Dating

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The question of "What is love?" has piqued curiosity and engendered frustration for much of history. The exasperated answer that you "just know" when you are in love is reflected in the body of sociological literature on the phenomenon. Sociologists do not seem to agree on a uniform definition, although there are several competing but complementary typologies that attempt to pin down those emotional and behavioral states that add up to romantic "love."

Love scholarship can be roughly divided into two philosophical camps: (1) that which argues love must have certain components to be genuine, for instance, to differentiate it from mere liking or lust, and (2) that which suggests that love is a publically informed but privately experienced state that is whatever the person "in love" believes it to be. Research on romantic love attachments often addresses the behaviors used in dating or, more infrequently, courtship; however, not all research on dating and courtship specifically addresses love. In this chapter, I will treat the three topics as separate. This is a conceit; clarity may be improved by separating the threads of romantic entanglement, but in research, as in life, the division is nowhere near as neatly accomplished.

It should also be mentioned here that the experience of love as understood in modern Western society has not been shared by all cultures in all times. In ancient Greece, true love between equals was seen as possible only between two men; although men married for purposes of procreation, a close emotional bond with a woman was seen as undesirable (Hendrick and Hendrick 1992). Romantic love as featured in novels and film began in the twelfth century. At this time, love came to be understood as an intense and passionate relationship that made the lover somehow a better person and was thus a worthy pursuit, albeit one with elaborate rules and rituals that required time and resources (Singer 1984). The ability to participate was associated with aristocrats or members of the "court," and it is this circumstance that gives us the term courtship.

Still, the expectation that one would love one's spouse was many years in coming. According to Stone (1980), changes in economic production and labor markets, together with public health measures, helped to encourage young persons to marry for love. Families had less sway over the choices of young people as production moved away from the family and into the factory, and as life expectancy increased, so did the emotional investment a spouse was willing to make in his or her partner. In some cultures where partners are still chosen by a young person's family, love is still not seen as a requisite for marriage. In this view, romantic love is a poor basis for forming a lasting union—and this normative stance is evident in research on spousal choice and sentiment. In one study (Levine et al. 1995), researchers asked participants in 10 countries whether they would marry a person who had the traits that they hoped for in a spouse, but whom they did not love. In the United States, fewer than 5 percent of people said that they would make such a match, while in nations such as Pakistan and Japan, young people were much more likely to consider such a union (50.4 and 35.7 percent, respectively). In nations where familism takes...
other couples experience what can be termed global adoration, which seems to increase marital satisfaction and stability (Neff and Karney 2005:480).

The closeness experienced by partners determines the form of love experienced according to Sternberg (1986). Sternberg’s well-known triangle theory of love suggests that love is a triangle with three points, each formed by a component of love: intimacy (i.e., emotional investment and closeness), passion (excitement and arousal, both emotional and physical), and commitment (a decision to maintain the relationship over time). A love relationship may be stronger in one or two areas and thus have a different character than would another relationship that features a different combination of attributes. For instance, infatuated love features great passion but lacks both intimacy and commitment, fatuous love includes passion and commitment without intimacy, and consummate love completes the triangle with all three components present.

COURTSHIP

Love and courtship are associated in Reiss’s (1960, 1980) wheel theory of love. Unlike Sternberg’s triangle theory, wheel theory assumes a standard progression of romantic relationships that encourages love to develop during the courtship process. These stages are sequential, each successful completion leading to the next step in the courtship process. First, couples experience rapport, or a feeling of ease with one another. Often, this is the result of shared attitudes and backgrounds, which encourages homogamy (or the tendency of people to marry others who are similar to themselves in background and experience). When a couple has rapport, communication is easier and the next stage of self-revelation is facilitated. In this stage, each partner exposes “who I am” to the other; within the norms of their social class and culture, partners will reveal information about themselves to the other, which helps to build closeness. As partners learn more and more about one another and begin to feel closer, the sentiment of mutual dependency grows. In this stage, each partner begins to rely on the other and feel as part of an interdependent unit. If this stage is fully experienced, and the relationship continued, the partners will take on unique significance for one another. One doesn’t merely have “a girlfriend” who could be easily replaced by another female of similar background and attractiveness. This person brings unique benefits not easily found with others and thus this person has special status. If the couple completes the final stage of intimacy need fulfillment, by each partner deciding that the relationship fits his or her needs for closeness and disclosure, the relationship will likely result in an official partnering.

Another metaphor for partner choice during courtship is a “filter.” Alan Kerckhoff and K. E. Davis (1962) posited a filter theory of partner choice based on couples successfully passing through a series of filters, including social characteristics, similarity of values, and need complementarity.

At each stage, potential partners who are not acceptable are excluded from further consideration. Murstein (1970) refined this theory with his stimulus-value-role (SVR) model of partner selection. In brief, partners progress from the stimulus stage, where social similarity and physical attractiveness first catch one’s attention, through the stage of value where partners compare attitudes and beliefs on a variety of issues to check for fit and compatibility, and finally to role, to see if the potential partner fits with the idealized expectations that each has for a potential mate. Interestingly, Murstein notes that while physical attraction is very important for the initiation of a partnership, people generally choose partners whose attractiveness is similar to their own rather than seeking to find the most physically impressive partner possible.

Generally, courtship differs from dating in that it is more structured and subject to cultural norms. Courtship, unlike the looser dating, is acknowledged as codified behavior designed to lead to a permanent partnership or marriage (Cere 2001). Some researchers who detail courtship norms and patterns suggest that the erosion of courting behavior in Western societies in the twentieth century, while not solely determinate, corresponds to a lack of preparation for marriage and the attendant rise in rates of divorce (see Kass and Kass 1999).

Theories of Courtship

Courtship as a field of inquiry in modern sociology has been called “virtually moribund” (Glenn, cited in Cere 2001). Few academics in family sociology now study the more traditional pathways that young adults take to marriage. According to Cere (2001), studies of courtship are now found within three general schools of inquiry: sociobiology, exchange theory, and close-relationship theory (p. 55).

Willard Waller (1937) was one of the first sociologists to note that the marriage contract was based on a bargain that was becoming less and less explicit. In Waller’s view, couples placed greater stress on love as a basis for marriage because of the lack of understanding of agreed-on and culturally sanctioned bases for marriage.

Courtship, then, stopped being a proving ground for potential partners to check one another for fitness as mate. Beth Bailey (1988) detailed the evolution of courtship from a private enactment of cultural expectation to a more public and also more sexually intimate “dating” brought about by market courtship. Courting moved from the home environment of family, church, and culture to the paid arena of dating sites such as restaurants, movies, and clubs. Courtship, beginning to morph into dating, became something to be purchased rather than something to be performed.

Gary Becker (1974) suggested the now well-known exchange theory model of courtship. In brief, people marry when the perceived benefits of a given pair bond outweigh the perceived costs of the bond. Each party is aware of
Deception is not the only serious complication that couples face. More direct forms of aggression in relationships also exist. Intimate partner violence began receiving widespread attention in the 1980s. Although earlier studies may have made brief mention of violence in intimate relationships, it was not until the 1980s that explicit acknowledgment was offered that sexual assault and other forms of violence occurred in courtship and dating (Cate and Lloyd 1992). This oversight is surprising, as physical violence occurs in as many as 40 percent of dating couples (Simons, Lin, and Gordon 1998). Both male and female partners report experiencing common couple violence such as pushing or slapping, but men are more likely than women to engage in serious violence against a partner (Johnson and Ferraro 2000). Lifetime chances of being the victim of intimate partner violence are also skewed by gender. About a quarter of women but fewer than 10 percent of men will be physically assaulted by an intimate partner (see Tjaden and Thoennes 1998).

RECENT TRENDS IN SCHOLARSHIP ON ROMANTIC PAIRINGS

Much of the sociological literature on romantic pairings prior to 1970 focused on homogamy, propinquity, and complementarity of roles among young heterosexual couples. In more recent decades, researchers have included homosexual couples in studies of love, dating, and partnering (for a notable example, see Vaughan 1986). Moreover, studies of dating and courtship now include older daters, who may or may not have children from previous unions or who may be grieving the loss of a spouse due to divorce or widowhood (see Huyck 2001; Dickson, Hughes, and Walker 2005). Among adults in later life, dating relationships follow traditional gender norms (McElhany 1992) and provide a great deal of personal satisfaction and emotional closeness whether or not the relationship leads to marriage (Buckcroft and O’Conner 1986). Still, seniors who date experience some drawbacks unique to their life circumstances. Older women in the dating market feel vulnerable to being taken advantage of financially and practically in what Dickson et al. (2005) term the “nurse and purse phenomenon” (p. 78).

Work in this field evolves as people find new and innovative ways to relate to one another sexually and romantically. At present, two subfields are emerging as very important to the study of romantic pairings: work on love relationships that involve distance, such as cyber-romance or “living apart together” (LAT) relationships (Levin 2004), and on the liminal and open-ended pairings usually, but not exclusively, experienced by young adults and which have been termed friends-with-benefits relationships (Hughes, Morrison, and Asada 2005).

The more well-known of the two areas of inquiry is an exploration of what in the past was combined into the notion of “long-distance relationships.” These relationships have exploded with the advent of the Internet; it is now possible to meet partners, disclose personal information in real time through messaging, and even be physically intimate virtually. Online relationship research is a burgeoning field that includes work on Internet personals as a way to meet potential partners (see Groom and Pennebaker 2005), online chat as a gateway to potential real-world infidelity (Mileham 2003), online intimacy as a form of sexual exchange (Waskul 2002), and e-mail messaging (Hovick, Meyers, and Timmerman 2003) as a means of relationship maintenance.

The LAT relationship is a “historically new family form” that developed due to changing norms and societal circumstances over the past 30 years (Levin 2004). Partners in LAT relationships view themselves as a committed couple and their social network shares this image, but the partners maintain separate residences—sometimes hours away from one another—due to work or familial obligations or even personal preference. These relationships are distinguished from commuter marriages or relationships in that the pair does not share a primary home part-time, with one partner also renting an apartment during work or school.

A very recent trend in relationship research involves the friends-with-benefits relationship (FWBR) that involves sexual intimacy but not necessarily an explicitly emotional romantic connection as “romance” is traditionally understood. These pairings may or may not involve expectations by partners that the relationship will evolve into something more emotionally intimate (Hughes et al. 2005). These relationships combine the benefits of a friendship with that of a sexual relationship, but without the responsibility and time constraints present in more traditional romantic relationships.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Research on love, courtship, and dating will continue to evolve as new modes of pairing up and maintaining emotional closeness become more accessible. It is likely that electronic modes of relating will receive more attention from scholars. Not only has the Internet reduced much of the stigma of placing the “personals ad,” but early stages of courting and relating can now be conducted with little—or no—in-person contact. Obviously, such circumstances come with attendant complications: How does one establish rapport and trust without the many cues in-person contact allows? What are the effects of distanced relating on disclosure and truth telling? Do these pairings become sexual more quickly because of a heightened sense of intimacy and “knowingness”? Extrarelationship pairings via electronic media will also continue to garner increased attention, as the definition of what “counts” as cheating moves further from a physical-contact model to a more flexible conceptualization of contact that takes attention, time, and focus from the primary relationship.