

## Romantic Love in Heterosexual Relationships: Women's Experiences

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**ABSTRACT** Narratives of romantic love pervade Western culture. However, the complexity of the lived experience of romantic love is not reflected in many of these. Qualitative research that addresses this complexity is largely absent in the psychological and anthropological literature. My research is an attempt to redress this oversight. Utilizing a qualitative framework and individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight heterosexual women of European descent, it examines women's lived experiences of romantic love. The findings are discussed in the context of a broad range of academic theories and research on romantic love. My results indicate that romantic love has affected women in both positive and negative ways, and that the interviewed women were far more ambivalent about romantic love than popular culture would have us believe.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Hendrick and Hendrick (1992) it is impossible to find a single, subjective meaning of romantic love that everyone experiences in the same way. This is not surprising to someone like me who has a background in anthropology, sociology and psychology, and who has practiced as a couple therapist. Through my academic background I have come to think of romantic love as a social construct that sometimes has various meanings in different cultures, and which may be expressed differently by people within the same culture. Further, although there is a wide range of academic literature about romantic love there are a lack of qualitative studies that focus on women's lived experiences of romantic love. Bringing the two points together then, I undertook to do qualitative research exploring how the construct of romantic love, functions in some heterosexual women's lives. The research took place in New Zealand, a Western country with a multi-ethnic population. The largest segment of the population is of European descent, and for this particular research, qualitative interviews of women were drawn from that population to explore the themes of Western experiences of romantic love. In order to clarify the theoretical basis for this research some important theories on romantic love will first be briefly outlined before presenting an analysis of some of the themes present in the interviews with these women.

Romantic love is popularly considered to be an experience that is central to Western social life (Denmark, Rabinowitz and Sechzer, 2005) and, according to some researchers, it has replaced religion as the arena in which individuals seek meaning (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1990; Burkart, 2000; Illouz, 2003; Johnson, 1983). One Jungian therapist argues "romantic love is the single greatest energy system in the Western psyche" (Johnson, 1983, p. xi); while sociologists posit that it is the new "fundamentalism" of modernity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1990). Romantic love is also one of the most ubiquitous subjects of mass media and popular culture; images of romance are the main themes of many movies, songs, magazines and advertisements (see Illouz, 1991; Pearce and Stacey, 1995).

Not surprisingly it has been very difficult to "define" love and romantic love. According to Beall and Sternberg (1995, p. 417) "definitions of romantic love always seem incomplete and dry versions of a sometimes explosive experience, which might cause the reader to wonder if the author of the definition has ever been in love." Any answer to what love and romantic love is must reflect its time period and cultural context. Mainstream social psychological researchers have developed numerous theories on romantic love but with little regard for history and culture (Burns, 2000). They have "measured" romantic love and created categorisations that have been widely accepted as "real" and "common-sense" (see

Burns, 2000; Cherry, 1995). For example, biologists and evolutionary psychologists usually define love as an attachment process that has a biological basis (Buck and Ginsburg, 1991; Buss, 1989). Drawing upon biochemical research, Liebowitz (1983) argues that romantic love arises from forces within the hominid brain that are independent of the socially constructed mind. This implies that romantic love must be present within every individual and every culture.

Anthropologists such as Jankowiak and Fischer (1992), while not necessarily subscribing to the evolutionary and biochemical theories mentioned above, also conclude that romantic love is a universal phenomenon; a panhuman characteristic that stretches across cultures. They found evidence of romantic love in at least 147 of the 166 cultures they studied. Although the 19 cultures that didn't show it goes against their argument that it is universal they could establish that romantic love existed in the majority of cultures they looked at. The hypothesis that romantic love is universal is also supported by psychological studies which found that romantic love has occurred in all eras, can occur at almost any age (so it includes children), and it happens across all ethnic groups (Hatfield and Rapson, 1996; Hatfield, Schmitz, Cornelius and Rapson, 1988). Using a questionnaire called the Passionate Love Scale; they concluded that girls and boys as young as four have experiences of falling in love passionately.

Some sociological approaches consider love to be a learned behavior, culturally transmitted from one generation to the next through modeling, stories, imitation, and direct instruction (see Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992). On the other hand, social scientists exploring the historical origins of romantic love describe it as a specific development in Western culture correlated with the rise of nuclear families, the erosion of personal networks, and the rise of individualism (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1990; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2003). Some analysts of romantic love in modern societies argue that there is a distinct connection between the culture of individualism in late modern societies and romantic love as a mass phenomenon (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1990; Illouz, 2003; Solomon, 1981). This is supported by other researchers who administered scales measuring attitudes toward love and romance to a total of 273 university students from West Germany, Japan, and the U.S (Simmons, Kolke

and Shimizu, 1986). Their results support the hypothesis that romantic love is valued highly in less traditional cultures with fewer extended family ties. Romantic love is less valued in cultures where kinship networks influence and reinforce the relationship between marriage partners. Japanese students reported significantly lower agreement with attitudes valuing romantic love than West German students. The responses from American students fell between those of the other two cultures. Psychologists Dion and Dion (1991, p.31) reached the same conclusion stating, "One interpretation of our findings is that the more collectivistic individual may be less likely to report developing a romantic involvement because the strongest affective relationships are found in family relationships and diffused across a network of peer interactions rather than being focused on a heterosexual peer". These studies conceptualise romantic love as a cultural construct that is constituted differently across cultural contexts.

It appears then that different scientific disciplines and theoretical orientations produce diverse research outcomes, probably because each focuses on particular aspects of love in general and romantic love in particular. Because it is impossible to find a single, subjective meaning of romantic love that everyone experiences in the same way, some authors argue that "it is necessary to conceive of and to measure love as a multi-dimensional rather than a unidimensional entity. Love takes different forms for different people in different situations and should not be viewed narrowly" (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992, p. 50). Certainly, love in general is a multidimensional construct, which comprises several facets and is known and experienced through its many manifestations: altruistic love, romantic love, unconditional love, parenthood, friendship and humanitarianism (O'Sullivan and O'Leary, 1992).

Cranny-Francis and her colleagues (2003, p. 233) note, "gender theorists contest the ideal that there could be something called love, romance or even emotion outside particular social and historical contexts." Discourse analysts claim it is vital to work with ambiguity and openness, understanding that romantic love is a "negotiable category" which takes its form within contrasting discourses. Those operating within this framework suggest that even when it comes to a powerful "emotion" such as romantic love, the experience is always constructed through narrative, language and stories (Wetherell, 1995).

From their perspective, romantic love is an invention and a construction drawing from different discourses that are mobilised by the individual and the surrounding society (see Redman, 2002). The discourse of romantic love can be informed by many (competing) textual and cultural sources. Even the discourse itself can be plural: throughout history, and within different cultures (Pearce and Stacey, 1995). Jackson (1993, p. 12) describes this as follows:

We create for ourselves a sense of what ... 'being in love' is. We do this by participating in sets of meanings constructed, interpreted, propagated and deployed throughout our culture, through learning scripts, positioning ourselves within discourses, constructing narratives of self. We make sense of feelings and relationships in terms of love because a set of discourses around love pre-exists us as individuals and through these we have learnt what love means.

Giddens (1992) argues that the democratization of Western society created a transformation of intimacy in romantic relationships. He suggests that intimate relationships are now characterized by more equality and more personal satisfaction than in previous eras. Others have also claimed that men and women now have equal rights when it comes to finding happiness in a love relationship, and Lenz (1998) posits that power in relationships is equally shared between men and women. Tyrell (1987) suggests that romantic love presupposes equal individuation ("Gleichindividualität") for women and men because an enthusiasm for equality in love is not differentiated by gender.

However, many feminists take issue with these claims (for example Hollway, 1989 cited in Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993). They argue instead that romantic love obscures and disguises gender inequality and women's oppression in intimate heterosexual relationships (see Bartky, 1990; Burns, 2000; Jackson, 1995). Sociological research demonstrates that gender inequalities pervade heterosexual couple relationships and that we cannot separate what happens within the private life of a couple from wider social and cultural practices (see Jackson and Scott, 2002). Empirical research has also suggested that women are far from being satisfied with their male intimate partners (Burns, 2000; see also Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Vangelisti and Daly, 1997). It also appears that married men are less depressed and more satisfied with their relationships than are

married women (Fowers, 1991). Despite this many women have not given up on love or heterosexual relationships. Jackson (1995, p. 59) argues that "higher divorce rates, adultery and serial monogamy may indicate a continued search for romantic fulfillment rather than the abandonment of that quest." I agree with her and believe that women in Western cultures are expecting more out of their intimate relationships, which, in turn, has created new and different constructs of romantic love. This study attempts to investigate how women view and experience romantic love in intimate relationships.

## METHODOLOGY

I chose romantic love as a research subject because ever since I was a young woman I have been trying to understand my own emotional responses when I am in love. Through observing and talking to other heterosexual women about their experiences of romantic love I realised that other women struggle with some of the same questions and emotional responses as I did. I also wanted to explore the complexity of women's lived experiences of romantic love, and whether women unambiguously reproduce or resist representations of romantic love in popular culture. Due to the complexity of romantic love a qualitative research design was used. There are numerous studies about romantic love that utilized a quantitative research design in the field of psychology, but there are only a few studies that employed a qualitative research design. For this reason this study meets a gap in the psychological literature.

The research took place in Auckland, New Zealand. Seven women who self-identified as New Zealanders of European descent and one European woman were the participants in this study. I chose to interview heterosexual women because I was particularly interested in the dynamics of intimate relationships between men and women. From my point of view it is in heterosexual love that the politics of gender and sexuality operate most clearly. Some of the participants were single, some married, and some in de facto relationships. I recruited the women from my own social networks; some were therapists and some were postgraduate psychology students. The age of the participants ranged from early twenties to early fifties. In retrospect I realise that I might have gained other

interesting insights from interviewing the partners of those women interviewed who were in relationship, or from interviewing a comparable group of men.

The research took the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews of between one and two hours. With the permission of the participants the interviews were recorded on audiotape. The tapes were later transcribed and transcripts were provided to participants for verification and possible modifications to the interview text.

I agree with Jackson (1995) when she argues that love, like all emotions, is not directly observable and we can, in the end, only look at the ways in which it is written and talked about. This research examines women's talk and feelings about their experiences of romantic love. I undertook focused or semi-structured interviews in which previously formulated questions were utilized. Marshall and Rossman (1999) explain that the researcher explores only few general topics in order to uncover the participant's opinions. Nevertheless the researcher does respect how the participant frames and structures the responses. Niobe Way (2001, p. 114) argues that "semi-structured approach to interviewing explicitly acknowledges both the interviewer's agenda (e.g., to understand a particular topic from the participant's perspective) and the participant's agency or power (e.g., to introduce important new knowledge that the interviewer had not anticipated."

The purpose of qualitative research is not to provide a representative sample (see Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Hence, it is important to note that the interview material discussed in this article does not claim to be representative of a wider population. It is representative of what these particular women experienced or felt. Nevertheless, other heterosexual women may recognize some similarity to their feelings or experiences. With respect to the qualitative analysis once the interviews had been transcribed, the resulting data was processed via a descriptive thematic analysis technique with an emphasis on qualitative evaluation of the data. After the reading process, the raw and relatively unstructured data was analysed with the intention of identifying patterns and themes. This analysis was drawn from the examples of Reinharz (1983), and Marshall's (1986) paradigm of "analysis through immersion" (p. 196), which attempts to give voice to those who are researched. This involved

multiple readings of the data and identifying connections, patterns, and themes that could create an organizational framework for summaries and discussions. This paper is a brief overview of some of the themes identified in the data. Lack of space prevents me from going into an in-depth analysis of the data presented and from providing more quotes from the data to illustrate my findings. These findings are then discussed in the context of a broad range of academic theories and research on romantic love. The assumption here is that romantic love is socially constructed: this means that when we "fall in love" we do so through the ways that are available to us in a particular historical time period and the social context in which we live.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Women's Ambivalence about Romantic Love

The first major theme identified in the analysis was women's ambivalence about romantic love, particularly with regard to the incredible highs and lows that are often a part of it. Romantic love was seen as an illusion by many of the participants. One of the participants stated:

*The illusion of romantic love I think is the most vital part. It's incredibly attractive - it's different from mundane life, but at the same time I think, it's the most frightening part of it - because at many levels it is illusion, and the illusion almost demands to be broken you know.*

The ambivalence of all of the participants toward romantic love was mirrored in their experiences of splits between what they defined as the emotional, physical, and cognitive aspects of it. Emotionally, they suggested, romantic love often made them feel wonderful, while also causing them to feel threatened and insecure. Some said it made them feel exhilarated, and that they experienced more pleasure and joy than usual. However they noted that this often did not last for very long, and usually gave way to increasing feelings of boredom and conflict as their relationships progressed. Jackson and Scott (2002, p. 2004) point out that "most couples at the beginning of their relationship experience a strong sense of 'togetherness' and intimacy, but once the first flush of love has faded women commonly report a loss of emotional closeness." This resonates with what the participants have experienced.

Many described changed perceptions on a bodily level as well. Some felt that their whole body rhythm changed and that they had more energy, particularly in the first stages of their relationships when they characterized themselves as "being in love".

On a cognitive and affective level, all participants said that they had experienced difficulties as they tried to hold on to their personal boundaries and a distinct sense of self. Several described this in terms of a conflict between their heads and their hearts. For example, some talked about how their head told them "not to repeat past patterns or get involved with this man" but their hearts overrode these warnings. This process of trying to gain clarity was considered painful by several women and labeled as an internal "war" by one participant:

*I think sometimes when I am able to stand back, I'm usually quite critical and I might think, "look before you leap" - and then I have all these sort of wars going on in my mind, about what I should and should not be doing. Cognitively, I think, "Oh you shouldn't be getting involved with this guy, it's going to be a real disaster". But then I have that war with thinking, "Oh, you know, I might I'm ready and I want this experience and my heart wants it" and, you know, that sort of war.*

This split between emotionality and rationality identified in the talk of the participants reflects the mind/body split typical of the wider discourses that underpin the cultural heritage of Western civilisation. This will be discussed in more detail later in the text.

Giddens (1992) argues that, for the first time in human history, the relations between men and women lack clear guidelines, supportive family networks, a religious background, and a convincing social meaning. The old social and economic rationales for marriage as a lifelong commitment have broken down for most, and as a result men and women are seeking new ways of relating to each other. The gradual liberation from fixed roles (especially gender roles) within the extended family, work-environments and couple relationships forces the individual to create new roles, and find new ways of constructing a meaningful existence (Schmid, 1989). All of a sudden, love becomes something, which has to be mediated by the lovers themselves; one not dictated by the society they live in (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1990). Thus, it is not surprising that most

participants experienced conflicts and ambivalence about love and relationships. This clash revealed the existence of different and conflicting themes about relationships, permitting some participants to be self-reflexive about romantic love.

### Positive Aspects of Romantic Love

Most of the women interviewed said they enjoyed the intimacy and physical closeness that is part of having an intimate relationship with another human being. Some women said that they experienced higher self-esteem because they felt that they had become the most important person in their partner's life. Connectedness, companionship, commitment and support for each other were also seen as positive elements of the experience of romantic love. This is an interesting point because it shows that having a male partner is very much valued by women as part of their gender identity. The aspects they enjoy the most in relationships are connectedness or commitment, which are traditionally more valued by women than by men (see Duncombe and Marsden, 1995). One woman perceived romantic love as an exciting adventure into unknown territory. Several women longed for the experience of a "higher kind of union" or, as Grof (1993) put it, "dual unity" which is expressed in the following quote by one participant:

*Physical intimacy is the greatest draw card. I think, physical intimacy, emotional intimacy and spiritual intimacy - a transcendent idea of intimacy you know... that sort of notion of being distinct personalities yet having an incredible sense of connection, you know, that's the biggest draw-card for me. Yeah, that's exactly it. It's a sense of actually enriching the other person consistently and, and yet maintaining a strong and distinct sense of myself - and the other person remaining strong in their sense of themselves, like, keeping ourselves intact while being in a relationship, but having an incredible connection that takes us both into a sense of union, that's beyond either one of us individually. A kind of a vision, you know, ... I see two individuals as like, represented by separate telescopes, and it's kind of like having binoculars all of a sudden, you know, so you get a wider frame of reference and a different experience, so it would be something along those lines.*

The feelings identified by the participants

quoted above correspond with recent research (Aron, Paris and Aron, 1995). In their longitudinal study of students' experiences, those who had "fallen in love" felt that their sense of self had "expanded", and they reported an increase in self-esteem and self-efficacy. Sternberg (1986, 1987), in his "triangular theory of love", posits that intimacy, passion, and commitment are the three major components of romantic love. These are the very components my interviewees identified as important and positive aspects of romantic love. One woman expressed these components in the following quote:

*I really enjoy intimacy the most, that feeling of closeness. When I feel that I can talk about anything and I get closer to my partner revealing my most intimate feelings and thoughts to him. The more I feel that the more committed I am in my relationship. ... Passion is of course the most enjoyable part of romantic love – at least as long as it lasts.*

The participant's emphasis on intimacy again implies that love is a social practice in a particular cultural context. Jamieson (1998) suggests that, what she calls, "disclosing intimacy" could be specific to the contemporary social context of Western societies. According to her constant mutual revelation of inner thoughts and feelings can only flourish in a society where the social and structural barriers between the lovers are removed. This particular form of intimacy is therefore correlated with "significant changes in both social divisions and social cohesion, particularly in inequalities and differences between men and women" (p. 14). The experience of the women quoted above show that they believed they were able to maintain their individual identity while still feeling a deep sense of connection with their lovers, reflecting the kind of intimacy that Jamieson has described. However, I would still argue that despite Jamieson's claim that social and structural barriers have been removed in modern societies, gendered politics of intimacy still operate. Discourses of the "nurturing female" continue to influence intimate relationships in ways that undermine otherwise significant shifts towards egalitarianism, which leads to the next theme in this research.

### **Negative Aspects of Romantic Love**

A third theme prominent in participant's

accounts relates to the perceived negative aspects of romantic love. Interestingly, all participants spent more time detailing these aspects than the more ambivalent or positive aspects of romantic love. All of those interviewed felt that they had been "burned" by past romantic relationships and claimed that, as a result of these negative experiences, they were much more wary of romantic relationships now. Some feared repeating the same patterns of intimacy that their parents had experienced, particularly because they believed that these patterns existed on a subconscious level, beyond their control. These comments contradict popular cultural notions that women 'romanticize' love in intimate relationships. One of the participants stated:

*I am afraid sometimes that I just repeat what my parents have done in their relationship. For example my mother always wanted more intimacy from my Dad and he always ran away from that. She told me that he withdraws and that is the same pattern that I have experienced with my partners in the past. They could never give me the closeness I wanted and maybe I repeat what my mother had to put up with.*

Romantic love seems to be inextricably tied up with positive illusions and fantasy (Martz, Verette, Arriga, Slovic, Cox and Rusbult, 1998), and with an unreal image of the other person (Klohnen and Mendelson, 1998). Most participants mentioned how difficult it had been to try and go beyond the illusory aspects of romantic love because the emotions they felt were so powerful that they tended to overpower their rational recognition of that element to romantic love. Their feelings about the power of emotions overwhelming rationality illustrates how strongly romantic love is inscribed with discourses of emotion and the gendered notion of these emotions. It is a much gendered split with women being seen as more emotional traditionally while men are seen as more rational. Rationality is usually more privileged in our culture, but women are often "allowed" to be more emotionally focused because that is what is expected of them (see Denmark et al, 2005). This is also a finding of Peplau and Gordon (1985) who found that women report more emotional reactions to "falling in love", such as losing their ability to concentrate more than men do. It would have been interesting to find out whether the male partners or ex-partners of the interviewees experienced similar emotions while they were in the relationship;

however, that was beyond the scope of this research.

Another negative aspect experienced by several women was the insecurity they felt about their bodies and their anxiety about this resonates with the comment below.

*Um, with romantic love, of course, comes the feeling of anxiety. What I don't enjoy at all is wanting to impress the other person, which usually comes with being in love with someone romantically; feeling insecure about my body, feeling insecure about whether I'm good enough, really, to keep that person interested in myself.*

Bartky (1988, p. 72) highlights the disciplinary practices women must master in pursuit of the perfect body when she writes, "Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other". She claims that success in the attainment of a beautiful body gains a woman male attention but very little real respect, and rarely any social power. Participants' fear of not being "beautiful enough" reflects societies' inferiorization of women's bodies in general. In contemporary patriarchal culture women and men are empowered differently by romance and are given contrasting positions in the discourses of romantic love (Wetherell, 1995). From my point of view it is not surprising that in a society that values physical beauty so much some participants positioned themselves in roles where they were not "beautiful enough" or "interesting enough" to hold onto a man long-term. These concerns reveal how differently gendered discourses of romantic love impact on gender identity.

Those participants who had experienced being left and/or rejected by their partner/s described this as an almost unbearable experience. One participant explained:

*Romantic love just has those paradoxical things, you know - intense exhilaration and deepest despair whenever I've felt rejection from my partner, or he is starting to withdraw, or that it's not going to last, or something like that.*

Some suggest that the most distressing after-effects of a failed relationship will be different for the rejecter than for the rejected lover (Baumeister, Notman and Iverson, 1993). It is hypothesised that the rejected lover is prone to experience humiliation, disappointment, thwarted love and low self-esteem, and the rejecter is likely to experience frustration, guilt and social awkwardness. Participants who had been rejected readily described experiencing what they call a loss of

strength, despair and desolation as a result of rejection:

*After he left it was just this horrible desolation and sudden loss of spiritual strength; and because I put so much energy into being with him, and the relationship - it was like, that was it. There wasn't anything else in the world besides our relationship, and us and then yeah, so that, I got burnt.*

Although some participants said that they do not feel complete without a man, others stated that they feel more whole and empowered without a man in their life, which is expressed, in the following quote:

*Um, well I mean, I like to be on my own and make my own decisions. It is the freedom that I enjoy, just the space and the solitude around me ... that I can just, at any time, be in tune with anything that's around me. I can go and do things, and walk away from it exactly when I like. I can get up when I want, I can go to bed when I want. I can do what I want. It's like there's nothing intruding.*

The last comment reflects the view of modern critics of romantic love who talk about deliberately distancing ourselves from the 'myth' of romantic love. Findings from Calderwood's (1987) interviews with people involved in the women's, gay, communitarian, or men's movements indicate self-conscious distancing from passionate absorption with romantic love, and rejection of the breakdown of autonomy that it often entails. Similarly, many of the women interviewed for this study directly expressed disenchantment with, anger at, and even disgust about, aspects of romantic love and its consequences in their lives. It is interesting to note in this context that there is research evidence to suggest that many heterosexual men do not do "romance" (Burns, 2000; Duncombe and Marsden, 1995) which might contribute to relationship dissatisfaction for women.

All of the women interviewed commented on the power imbalances they had experienced in romantic relationships, and the difficulty of having to constantly struggle for equality. They thought that they had to give more on emotional levels than their partners and several felt uncomfortable about how easily they got seduced into giving too much and ending up drained of energy, which is expressed in the following quote:

*Romantic love is sort of something that sort of carries you along and I think you're feeding*

*it with all this emotional energy, but then somehow you don't have anything left. Like when things fall flat, not only has that [the relationship] gone but you're totally depleted as well.*

Jackson (1995, p. 50) argues that the concept of romance is "implicated in maintaining a cultural definition of the notion of love which is detrimental to women". Bartky also believes (1990, p. 100) a "gendered imbalance [exists] in the provision of emotional support" which positions women so that they give more and receive less than men. She says "men get the benefits; women run the risks" (p. 113). Lewis and her colleagues (1992) found as well that women put more energy into heterosexual relationships than men.

The implication of this for the women in this research was that too much giving was related to losing much of their energy in love relationships. All felt that this "emotional giving" and many other forms of giving was a uniquely gendered experience – which is expected of women and makes up part of our socialization into "appropriate femininity". The term "emotional labor" is applicable to the realm of intimate relationships, and the results of this research certainly support the notion that "women are the emotional laborers of love" which can be detrimental to their energy levels (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003, p. 232; see Jackson and Scott, 2002). Two participants stated:

*Romantic love is quite disempowering. You actually are weaker I think, you're not strong, you're not powerful. You're not out there changing the world. You're sort of lounging around, feeling in love. It's quite pathetic when you think about it, you know. Thinking about sex and things and just wasting a lot of time. It's a lovely floaty, dreamlike thing; you don't actually get any where in your life with it, do you? I mean, only just asking me now has made me think about it. You're not powerful, you're not strong. (1. Participant)*

*I felt that I was doing all the emotional labor in our relationship, you know and he just took that for granted which made me really mad. I tried to explain to him that he needs to take responsibility for that as well but he never took me serious and I never felt we were equals. (2. Participant)*

The majority of the participants in this research complained that they had to struggle for equality in their couple relationships.

Research strongly suggests that romantic love is a modern construction, which tends to disempower women (see Hollway, 1984 cited in Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993). At first glance, it can be perceived as having a constraining effect on women's lives. As previously noted, the participants recognized their disempowerment through their positioning in romantic narratives, and consciously struggled for equality in an effort to try and rebalance the dynamics of their relationships. Interestingly, several women noted how being in love distracted them from "changing the world" and getting lost in self-indulgence.

Some also noted that there is a danger of losing friends and of giving up on other interests through focusing solely on their partner.

*GS: Tell me more about other experiences you had when you are in love*

*Besides losing friends and things? I think just that there's real emotional dependence as well and a loss of personality. I mean you can really just shape your whole life around someone if you want to. It can kind of control every aspect; do you know what I mean? I mean you can just kind of gear all your plans or your aims towards that. To me, that's really just like a huge trap, yeah.*

*GS: How long do you think romantic love lasts?*

*It depends how well the couple negotiate. I think, honoring and respecting the other person and I think in heterosexual relationships the big issue is will the man absolutely honor and respect the woman's difference? Because I think women are trained in honoring and respecting men's difference [in order] to get a man and keep a man and all that rubbish around the whole thing of men and women - the whole myth - that often men begin to devalue who the woman is, that's because society actually devalues who women are a lot.*

This woman hints at the structural and gendered inequities of social power. In a society that often devalues women, it can be a challenge for woman not to adopt their male partner's perspective on the world. Therefore, in addition to the risk of disproportionate caring in intimate relationships, women also "risk a subtle subsuming of identity which can inhibit their own development in a range of ways" (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003, p. 235). Felmler (1994), in his study with 413 heterosexual dating individuals, found that less than half the respondents perceive their

relationship to be equal in the distribution of power, and that men are twice as likely as women to be viewed as the partners having more power. This problem is reflected in the view held by most of my participants that it is usually the woman who alters her plans, gives up friendships, ceases to be politically active and focuses solely on her partner. However, even though power imbalances and inequalities between men and women were recognized as major disadvantages of romantic relationships for women, some participants claimed that because of their increased awareness of these issues, they would be unlikely to allow inegalitarian relationship practices in their future relationships. Some felt that their negative experiences had, ironically, lead to "a journey of empowerment" in which they would be better able to maintain their sense of self and clearer personal boundaries in future intimate relationships. One participant explained:

*Yeah, and I have lost myself before in romantic relationships to a level where it absolutely devastated me, and I learnt from that one relationship, I learnt an enormous lesson, which was that I was relying on someone else to give me my sense of my boundaries, and myself and I would not have believed that I had given so much away. I always thought of myself as much more independent most of the time, and I didn't realise how much of myself I'd given away. I had no idea until that person walked out on me, and then that taught me very clearly that it could be very dangerous if I didn't have a greater sense of self-awareness about what was going on, and it really did rock me very deeply. I still would say there are residues from that, which I haven't gotten over, but I learnt an incredible lesson there, and I see myself acting differently to many other women I know in romantic relationships, on an emotional level. I much more believe in the need to find my own sense of myself, and to try and keep that intact and not give myself away so much.*

Many of those interviewed readily identified with this dilemma: they desire to experience and express love fully but at the same time do not want give up their boundaries and power any longer. While this last statement is an example of a woman consciously trying to resist many of the negative aspects she felt were a part of romantic relationships, it should be noted that if women start to uncritically "buy into" a discourse of "independence" they might be adopting

patriarchal value systems which devalue interdependence through one-sidedly celebrating individual autonomy. These patriarchal values can undermine women's well being, and in fact, the mental health system often pathologises women for their way of relating and connecting to others (Walters, 1990). According to her, intense connectedness is frequently labeled as "enmeshment" or "co-dependency". She further argues that in most Western societies mental health is not measured in terms of interdependence, affiliation, connections and taking care of each other, but instead by individuation, hierarchy, boundaries and independence. One can conclude from this that women could potentially experience a double process of victimization. Firstly, they are victimised by being socialised in a patriarchal culture, which devalues women in general, and secondly, by being pathologised through the ways in which women are positioned in heterosexual couple relationships.

## CONCLUSION

As already outlined my research is based on a very small sample of participants and does not claim to be representative of a wider population. For a start all of the participants are European and come from a Western society which has developed very specific narratives of romantic love. Further, many of the participants came from an academic and/or therapeutic background, which would have informed their experiences of, and views on, romantic love. I have argued that romantic love is a sociocultural construction that has many powerful effects on our lives. Romantic love is also a strongly gendered experience, (see Burns, 2000; Denmark et al., 2005; Duncombe and Marsden, 1995; Redman, 2002) a finding that is also supported by participant's accounts. The participants in this study reported that they did most of the emotional labor in their relationships and that they struggled to achieve gender equality in their relationships. On the one hand, the romantic love construct can be interpreted as fixing women into potentially oppressive sexual relations. However, as my data indicate, some women felt that they have learnt to resist patriarchal domination and empower themselves through their experiences of romantic love. Importantly, though, it was usually their negative experiences of romantic love that have most facilitated these changes. The results indicate that

romantic love had profoundly affected those interviewed, in both positive and negative ways. Women's ambivalence toward romantic love was a striking finding of this research. It is my hope that any insights generated through this research will further enable women to resist, at least to a certain degree, constraining effects of the dominant narratives of romantic love that permeate popular Western culture.

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