

# Love and Personal Relationships: Navigating on the Border Between the Ideal and the Real

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*“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens—to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.” The Velveteen Rabbit (Williams, 1922/1975)*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, psychology has seen a growing interest in interpersonal relationships, including the relationship of love. An interesting aspect of this proliferation is that most of the dialogue on love has been conducted within the theoretical context of the literature on personal relationships. While periodicals such as *Personal Relationships*, or *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* flourish, one has yet to see a *Journal on Love and Loving*. Personal relationships are research units that can be operationalized. Love is difficult to operationalize. Despite this, we propose that love is an ideal, and that it can be real.

Unlike the set of definitions of personal relating about which there is broad agreement, definitions of love differ widely as was found in a review of instruments assessing love (Myers & Shurts, 2002). Myers and Shurts demonstrate that while some researchers fail to provide operational definitions for the construct of love their scales claim to measure (e.g. Mann, 1991), others approach the problem of defining love by classifying it into types. There emerge, therefore, classifications such as romantic and conjugal love (Knox & Sporakowski, 1968), passionate and companionate love (Hathfield & Sprecher, 1986), intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986), *Eros* (love of beauty), *Ludus* (playful love), *Storge* (friendship love), *Pragma* (realistic love), *Mania* (obsessive love), and *Agape* (altruistic love) (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Lee, 1973). There are interesting overlaps between these types. For example, romantic love, passionate love, passion, and *Eros*, are all descriptions of a dyadic process within a relationship that has a basis of sexual attraction. Each of these larger categorizations appears to be centered around

another, more fundamental need. What is unclear, however, is whether love can be defined as anything other than a central aspect of an intimate relationship that has its basis in one or more of these “fundamental” needs. We address this question in the present paper.

#### LOVE IS NOT LOVE

Discussions of motivational factors underlying interpersonal relationships are usually launched with the Aristotelian dictum that “Humans are social animals.” But how are we to understand this, especially in relation to the most social of our social attributes, the ability to love? In the literature of psychology, one may discern many potentially insightful approaches to this question. Let us mention three. Although they do not exhaust the theoretical approaches in this growing field (see e.g. Hatfield & Rapson, 2000; Sternberg & Barnes, 1988), they are among the most prominent, and they are representative in that each derives love from a psychological process other than itself.

Perhaps the most developed is the psychoanalytic idea of Freud, with its newer extension, Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory. Bowlby’s idea is that the immature young of mammals need protection of a parent in order to survive. The extension is that adult love derives from the early love of one’s mother or mother substitute, and from having been loved by her (or sometimes him). In psychoanalytic terms, adult love is caught up, therefore in an ever-receding experience of what Lacan (1957) called the metonymic nature of desire: each new adult love object is a reflection of, a reminder of, a partial fulfillment of, one’s first object of attachment. Hazan and Shaver (1987) have argued that styles of infant attachment are re-enacted in the styles of adult love relationships, and in empirical confirmation of this idea, Waters et al. (2000) have followed up children from age one when their infant attachment styles were measured to age 20, when the Adult Attachment Interview was given. Except when children came from very high risk backgrounds (Weinfield et al., 2000) the three styles of attachment recognized in infancy—secure, avoidant, ambivalent—continued into adult love relationships. Love, on this view, is attachment.

A second, and increasingly popular argument is that the need to form and maintain extended relationships based on sexual partnerships has been selected for in our evolutionary history since it ensured great benefits for reproduction and survival (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Based on the work of Lovejoy (1981) a number of theorists, among whom is Fisher (1992), have argued that pair bonding, which is rare among other primates, became an important evolutionary departure in hominids with the emergence of upright walking. With the specialization of the foot for walking, infants could no longer cling to their mothers, who became less mobile, less able to forage for themselves and their infants. The solution was for hominids to renounce promiscuity, and its

accompanying ignorance of fatherhood, for pair bonding. This development was sustained by extended sexual receptivity in females and the assurance—more or less—that a male who put economic input into the family (male provisioning as it is called) thereby contributed to offspring who carried his genes. By this argument, our genes program psychological preferences and extended sexual interest in a single partner, enabling evolutionary needs to be met. Love, on this view, is pair bonding, a need that holds partners together in a mutually beneficial fulfillment of evolutionary destiny.

A third kind of proposal is that of exchange. The social-exchange theory of interpersonal relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) specifies how comparisons of costs and benefits of staying in relationship are continually made. It states that relationships are likely to dissolve when costs exceed benefits. Objects being exchanged include sex, social support, and food. A recent theory of marital accounting has been offered by Gottman (1993), based entirely on positive and negative emotional contributions to interactions such as conversation. He has proposed that couples who do not, in their interpersonal interactions, maintain a ratio of at least five positive contributions to one negative, are destined for separation. Love, then, and the consequent desire to stay in a relationship, wax and wane, depending on how much each partner benefits from the partnership. On this view love is a market with its own rates of exchange; relationships between the over-benefited and under-benefited are seen as both fragile and unwise (Hathfield & Walster, 1978).

Each of these three kinds of approaches offer important and insightful contributions to the psychology of human relationships. Their conclusion, however, is that love is not love. It is a phantasied relationship derived from infantile longings; it is pair bonding associated with reproduction; it is exchange of emotional goods at home of a kind to which one has become accustomed at the mall. Yet if love is nothing but an emotion aimed at the fulfillment of attachment, pair-bonding, and emotional reinforcement needs, it is hard to see why our cultural imagination should conjure up the idea of love, and appreciate it so strongly. Yet, Western popular imagination persists in seeing love as unique, mystical, elusive, life-long, even though all of these qualities are counterintuitive from more sensible, evolutionary and psychological points of view.

#### PARADOX

According to attachment, evolutionary, and social-exchange, theories of love, no one should ever sacrifice his or her life for a (usually genetically unrelated) sexual partner—at least not before joint offspring have been produced. Romeo and Juliet, facing the loss of their love objects, should have never taken their own lives. Their tragic love story is counterintuitive for yet another reason. If one takes seriously another implication of evolutionary theory, the exchangeability of love

objects, one person should be as good as another to fulfill our evolutionary needs. Romeo would comfort Julia all the way to the Church, while Juliet would bear Ronan many beautiful children. The loss of any single relationship should be a less distressing event than it is. Why should one mourn a loss of a replaceable partner, when the wisest use energy would be to look for another? Yet everyday experience seems to say otherwise. Losing “real” or “true” love is as tragic as death. Our culture inclines us to believe that a part of the central core of a love relationship is that it is unique.

The contemporary cultural ideal of love includes concepts such as the existence of “soul-mates” and people often believe they are fatefully “meant for each other.” Yet it would scarcely be adaptive for a person to wait a lifetime anticipating a spectral soul-mate, passing over satisfactory partners who would be perfectly able to fulfill his or her attachment, reproductive, and exchange needs. The prevalence of positive illusions about romantic partners (Murray & Holmes, 1997) is yet another mystery. One would think it helpful to possess the ability to recognize the insufficiencies of one’s love object. This would be advantageous; it would promote timely departures (escapes?) should the potential partner be deemed less than suitable. Again, this seems not to be the case. Individuals in love find their lovers not only more physically attractive than do others who make disinterested judgments, but more socially attractive as well (Murray & Holmes, 1997).

Sociologists have found that that marriage as an institution has also become enslaved by the ideal of love, since individuals in contemporary society find the ideal of “love” to be a perfectly appropriate reason either to enter or to leave a marriage (Evans, 2003). Love has become a viable causal explanation for both ethically venerable and ethically questionable actions, and a synonym for meaning in life. Where does this ideal of love come from, and what are we to do with it?

#### CONVERGING FACTORS

We argue that the ideal of love in Western imagination and its cultural enactments in real relationships are results of two converging and powerful factors. The first is that interpersonal relationships and love have come to fulfill important existential needs, thus endowing the love partner, and partnership, with illusory divinity. The second is an understanding that love can exist without being based in something else that is different from it and more fundamental. Love, in its idealized cultural form, is an emotion through which value is “bestowed” on another person (Singer, 1984) via an altruistic respect and care for that person, unmotivated by one’s own needs (Fromm, 1956)—in short—a gift devoid of the need for reciprocation (similar to that found in *communal* relationships, Clark & Mills, 1979/1993). A corollary to the convergence of these two factors is that the illusory endowment of meaning based on searching for existential comfort can,

ironically, give opportunity for “ideal” love in actual relationships. Let us expand on these arguments.

#### LOVE AS AN EXISTENTIAL ANXIOLYTIC

Erich Fromm, in *Escape From Freedom* (1941), addresses the great feeling of existential doubt and uncertainty that ushered the break with the pre-individualistic medieval society and gave rise during the Renaissance to individuals who were more fully differentiated. With the waning of identification with one’s social position, and with a growing potential for individuals to act creatively in ways that were not fully socially prescribed, came both great opportunity and great fear. The meaning previously embedded within one’s social milieu diminished. The door closed on the safe confines of Middle Ages, a time when people knew what to do to please both God and man. Fromm (1941) suggests that individuals found different ways to escape from the anxiety that pervades this freedom. These ways included submission to different religious doctrines, to tyrannical leaders, and to cultural fads. Almost anything is suitable to be such a way, so long as it is validated by a substantial number of followers.

It appears that existential anxiety, an unseemly and importunate companion of freedom and potentiality, has permanently transformed our intimate relationships. Personal meaning—which in medieval times was safely assumed—has become the object of quests, and these quests are pursued most often in the context of intimate relationships. Terror management theorists have shown, experimentally, that individuals indeed use close relationships to buffer against the anxiety of impending death (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). It is not surprising that the ways in which close relationships soothe existential anxiety are manifold.

In *The Denial of Death*, Becker (1973), perceived that social comparisons are partly fueled by a great desire to feel “cosmic specialness” (p. 4). He argued that “an animal who gets his feeling of worth symbolically has to minutely compare himself to those around him, to make sure he doesn’t come off second best” (p. 4). Although on the world stage, a man may be of no consequence, in his family he may still be an emperor. At home, he is in a world in which he is, at least to his significant other, the center. Such a relation holds for both partners: a love relationship can be seen as a contract to be special to and for one another. The psychological benefit of having one’s own existence so validated is immense. It explains, in part, why *any* relationship (including a bad one) is sometimes perceived as better than *no* relationship. Positive illusions that individuals hold about their romantic partners can thus be seen as self-indexed compliments, of being special enough to be loved by someone with wonderful qualities.

There is another existential benefit: it includes a yet more powerful illusory validation of one’s self. Individuals suffering from existential anxiety may sometimes actively seek personal meaning within the person of the significant other.

Their partner may be ascribed qualities that transcend the merely human, and border on the divine. Courtly love between knights and high-born ladies, with its exuberant idealizations, arose in the critical period of the waning of the Middle Ages (Huizinger, 1941; Lewis, 1936). To be loved by one who seems godlike amounts to being godlike oneself. In the words of Skin Horse (in the epigraph to this essay) it amounts to “becoming Real”. Yet, is this process not illusory? Divinity can be projected rather than discovered in the significant other. It can be maintained to the extent that the loved object remains relatively opaque. And if this process of mystification-plus-adoration functions in both directions, one might find oneself speaking of *folie a deux*.

One may be tempted to wonder whether an individual who is drawn into such projections has, in the terminology of attachment theory, an “anxious attachment style” (cf. Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The kind of person who wants to melt into their romantic partner might come to mind. Or perhaps this type of a person might prefer a partner who has an attachment style marked by anxious avoidance, since avoidant strategies enable the partner to remain opaque enough to extend the interval before demystification sets in. If the loved object starts exhibiting existential vulnerability of his or her own, this illusion would tend to disperse. If—from separation or death—such a loved object were to be lost, the lover would be faced not with losing a reproductive partner but the meaning of life. As Shakespeare has often insinuated, human vulnerability to such errors of projective meaning constitutes a tragic flaw in human character.

#### LOVE AS A GIFT

Relationships of mutual projection are exchange relationships, even though what is exchanged is an illusion of personal meaning. If it is true that we are often held together by exchanges, and that what is exchanged may be illusion, the fact that half of marriages now end in divorce indicates that not all illusions can be sustained indefinitely. Yet, illusory endowment of meaning may occasionally lead to a genuine, altruistic “bestowal” of love on the partner in a relationship. How does this work?

Philosopher Irving Singer, in his momentous three-volume analysis of the nature of love (1984a/1984b/1987) distinguishes between two different forms of valuing: appraisal and bestowal. Appraisal is the determination of value based on objective criteria of the appraised object. In terms of interpersonal relationships, the appraisal value of a person is based on “marketable” qualities—attractiveness, industriousness, pleasant personality, and so on. The question that Singer poses is whether love is simply another, higher, form of appraisal. He answers: No. Rather, he argues, love is a form of “bestowal” of value, not elicited by qualities of the object, but bestowed freely, like a gift that carries no reciprocal expectations. It is within the process of giving that value is created, irrespective of whether the loved one fulfills one’s needs or not. In many cultures, the ideal of “real” or “true” love

is understood as modeled on God's bestowal of love on humans—an unconditional act that lacks any association with deservingness.

Other thinkers agree. Erich Fromm, in his *Art of Loving* (1956), describes *love* as including basic elements of care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. He defines it as “an active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love” (p. 22). He argues that true love for others has less to do with the lover's own needs, and more with concern for the other. Maslow (1969), too, differentiates between D-(deficiency) love, that is motivated by satisfaction of one's own needs, and B-(being) love, a more mature, giving, relationship. Clarke and Mills (1979, 1993) argue that in certain types of relationships, what they call *communal relationships*, cost-benefit calculations are not actively pursued but avoided. This is *Agape* love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989), altruistic love that is patient, kind, and undemanding. So we know what love is: an ideal emotion. Yet how does this knowledge translate into our very real and seldom ideal relationships?

These are the questions hidden between the lines that converge on the Ideal. *Agape*, for example, was not found by Lee (1974) in its pure form among his interviewees. Rather, “few respondents had brief agapic episodes in relationships otherwise tinged with selfishness” (p. 50). Individuals within relationships mostly employ appraisal modes of evaluation, and they engage predominantly in exchange relationships. We are embodied beings who are and will always be needy, and we reach the ideal of love only rarely and sporadically. It is often impossible to distinguish love from the mutual satisfaction of attachment, sexual, and exchange, needs. But this does not affect the presence of an ideal of love in our collective consciousness. One rarely finds a cultural script (be it a film, novel, or a song on the radio) that is not in some way concerned in finding “real love”. In recent years, this concern has developed into a cultural obsession (Evans, 2003), culminating in unheard-of profits for dating agencies and reality television shows that exploit love as its subject. Bachelors and bachelorettes are paid millions to find “true love” on television screens. Our cultural imagination is inundated with images of love-seeking and love-finding. In this cultural climate, knowing that the ideal love occasionally gets enacted in our personal relationships is both surprising and promising.

That fact that relationships often begin with exchanges and projected illusions of meaning does not exclude a potential for love, since these very illusions can lead to bestowing real meaning on another. A bi-directional illusory endowment of meaning, and comfort that accompanies it, can lead lovers to fulfill potential that the other sees in them. Being seen as having wonderful qualities can be a powerful motivator to augment those very qualities in oneself, much like a self-fulfilling prophesy (Crano & Melon, 1978).<sup>1</sup> Even the short term comfort and encouragement that is generally encountered in exchange-relationships can provide impetus for personal development, consequent reduction of neediness, and thus enhanced capability for loving. And this capacity to love can be encouraged in subsequent generations. There is evidence, albeit fragmentary, that having been

loved at some point in one's life as a child, or even in later life, makes it possible to be a good parent (Quinton & Rutter, 1988; Quinton, Rutter, & Gulliver, 1990). What this may mean is that from the cradle of a family of parents who have achieved the communal loving of the kind that Singer talks about—perhaps only partially or occasionally, for we are imperfect beings—there may grow children who will themselves be more able to love.

#### LOVE IS LOVE

It seems that love is love, or at least that it can occasionally be. We agree with Solomon (1991) that love is an emotion. We might better call it a sentiment—that is to say an extended emotion—which creates a frame (a script, a schema) for an ongoing relationship (Oatley, 2004) that enables each partner to realize aspects that one cannot realize alone, and among these is the possibility of giving a gift and coming to know and cherish the other person in his or her individuality. The bestowal enables each member of a couple to take part in an enlarged joint identity while maintaining some autonomy. And just as each individual is unique, so is each relationship-identity unique. Insofar as one's experience of infant attachment contributes to the trust we develop in the other, insofar as one's genes tend to make this person continually sexually attractive, and insofar as one relies on the other to contribute fairly to the shared activities of life, love is borne up by such currents. But they are neither the whole, nor the center.

So what does the Skin Horse really mean when he says that when someone really, really loves us, and not only to play with, then we become Real? He appears to describe what Fromm (1956) explained under the heading of respect, which denotes (in accordance with the root meaning *respecere* = to look at) “the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality.” This implies “the concern that the other person should grow and unfold as he is” (p. 23), and that the person who is doing the loving would do so for the sake of the loved one, and not only to satisfy a need of his or her own. Such a possibility does not include illusions of self-importance or compulsive anxiety management or dependence. The *less* needy we are, the greater our ability to love. Contrary to our evolutionary aims, love for others is, ideally, not about us, but about the loved one. And in a truly loving relationship, as this story goes, that other person is encouraged to develop and grow in a way that would fulfill his or her potentialities, thus becoming Real.

We are, of course, imperfect beings. We are, of course, heirs to the needs that have been passed to us via our genes. We are, of course, creatures of our culture, anticipating a fair exchange or even hoping for a better bargain at the next shop. But experience—perhaps not just illusory experience—points to the possibility of a different kind of exchange: an exchange in which as we gradually withdraw

the projections of existential anxiety and restlessness, possibly through painful tribulations, the other's outlines of his or her own self do become real. Perhaps we can even as a culture follow the Velveteen Rabbit's advice, and come to understand, discuss, promote, cherish, and love the Ideal of Love, not just the idea of To-Play-With. Perhaps then, the Ideal of Love will gradually fade, gradually wane as an Ideal, gradually become more Real.

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