

Perception of Love in Young Adults

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The present study investigated perception of love in young adults. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two women in which one was having her first love affair and the other one was having her second. After applying grounded theory, three staged theory of love emerged describing how love develops over time, how it is perceived and what different factors are associated with it. The first stage describes the process of falling in love. The second stage explains happiness and its associated factors. It also portrays bias against love and the troubles young adults have to face in family and society. The third stage depicts expectations that the lover would marry and become serious in career so can support a family. This study has implications for parents and counselors.

Keywords: love, perception, young adults, family

Love is a universal phenomenon. Everyone in life experiences love but their attitudes and experiences of love differs radically. It is a strong positive emotion of affection and attachment. It is a feeling of intimacy and care for someone. People in this life seek love. Everyone wants to feel special and to be cared of. When you find a person who really cares for you, is honest, sincere, and gives you happiness then you automatically get attached to that person. The feeling that he or she gives you is special and you don't want it to fade away which in turn keeps people together in a relationship. Different theorists have emphasized the importance of love, e.g., intimacy versus isolation in early adulthood is the sixth stage of Erickson's theory of psychosocial development showing the importance of intimate relationships in one's life (Santrock, 2002). Similarly Maslow has also highlighted love and belongingness as one of the important needs in humans revealing how love is important to survive after biological and safety needs are fulfilled (Maslow, 1943).

Firestone and Catlett (1999) describe love as "those behaviors that enhance emotional well-being, sense of self, and autonomy". Romantic love is a bond or connection between two people that results in trust, intimacy, and interdependence. In Rubin's view (as cited in Cherry, 2009), romantic love is composed of three elements; attachment, care, and intimacy. Attachment includes the need to have care and approval for the other person. Care is wishing the other person to be happy, and intimacy includes sharing of thoughts, desires, and feelings. According to Sheri and Stritof (2009), romantic love occurs when a person with his partner feels emotionally high, elated, and passionate. Love is also seen as a passion for another person to the extent that you can't live without him/her (Ashira, 2009). According to Gottschall and Marcus (2006), it is a desire for union with someone, to idealize him/her, to dramatically changes one's life priorities, to care about other person's well-being, and to feel empty and agony in his/her absence which is a universal experience.

Love in Pakistan and especially in Punjab has its roots in famous folk stories. Heer Ranjha is one of the most famous love stories wri-

ten by Waris Shah. It takes an insight into the meaning of love, what hardships partners have to face, how hard they try to be with each other and the agony they feel in each other's absence (Qalandar, 2008). Similarly, the story of Anarkali is also popular, in which Saleem was a prince and Anarkali was a slave girl and both fall in love which shows that socio-economic status is neglected in a love affairs and how beauty plays an important role (Désoulières, n. d). Many bachelors either secretly love someone or are openly involved in love affair but apart from those who view love as beautiful, there are also some young adults who consider it wastage of time. They think real love does not exist and people only seek company to pass time. People who are in true love want to spend maximum time with their partners. Their vision is restricted to only positive qualities and the flaws in their partners are overlooked. Luo (2007) reported that romantic attraction leads to positivity bias in which the person only sees the positive qualities in his/her partner. It also leads to similarity bias in which the person sees his/her partner similar to him/her and idealization biases in which the partner seems to be similar to one's ideal self.

Davenport (1992) have reported obsessive thoughts about the partner to be an important component of love. Partners think about each other all the time. They fantasize being with each other, e.g., going on a long drive, going for a dinner, getting married, etc. Even while hearing a romantic song they associate it with their partners. These fantasies bring happiness to them and also help in reducing stress. Master (as cited in Bering, 2009) examined if romantic partners altered the perception of pain. Results indicated that viewing lovers' photographs or holding their hands reduced the perception of pain though pain was stimulated more than the participants' pain threshold.

Love can be expressed in many ways. Some people express it verbally by saying sweet things which reflects care and sincerity. Some express it through acts like giving gifts, flowers or helping in a problem and some are in love but are unable to express it. Mardsden (2007) saw that in Pakistan, the Chitralis' expressed romantic love through poetry and also found elopement marriages to be very common.

Expectations are natural component in love. People expect that their partners would treat them as someone special, will give gifts, will help in a problem, will take out time for them etc. When these expectations are fulfilled love is flourished even more and when it doesn't it results in hurt and anger.

In spite of the societal norms which are against a love affair,

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people still get involved in it. People can fall in love with the other person due to a number of reasons. It can be the person's beauty, decency, good nature, understanding, honesty, or similar personality. One of the major reasons of falling in love is when one finds one's ideal. Ideal is the person who has all the qualities which one wants to have in his/her partner. Love is a physical and emotional attraction that spontaneously and magically evokes when the right person appears. This right person is the ideal in unmarried people's mind. When they find the person who fits the criteria of their ideal they try to be more and more in contact with that person which ultimately results in a relationship. Henderson (2007) has reported many young adults to be involved in inter-racial dating without being concerned about race differences. This shows that in love, things like race and religion which are important for the society do not matter. So, when people find their ideals other things become secondary. In Pakistani context, many people have observed inter caste affairs, negligence of age differences, and extra marital affairs. Although young adults know that their parents won't approve of it, they still continue their romantic relationship.

Media also impacts young adults' perception of love. Love songs, romantic movies and dramas depict how love changes and brightens up one's life. Sometimes movies also give unrealistic picture of love which results in perception that may have severe social repercussions, e.g., believing that it is okay to run away from home when parents don't approve their love affair and marriage which is spoiling young adults.

The present study aims to investigate the perception of love in young adults who are romantically involved in a relationship. It aims to explore what feelings do these people experience in love.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 2 women; both were 22 years of age. One was having her first and the other was having her second love affair. Both were students and were having relationships for the past one and a half year.

Assessment tools

Semi-structured interview: A semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants. A semi-structured interview is a technique of data collection in which limited set of questions are asked. It is flexible and allows new questions to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were taken from both participants after taking consent and formulating the interview questions. The questions asked were "What is meaning of love for you?", "How do you feel when you think you love him?", "How can love be expressed?", "What are the positive emotions you associate with love?", "Are there any negative emotions in love?", "Are there fantasies in love?", "What feelings do these fantasies give you?", "Are there expectations in love and what kind of expectations?", "Do you think love is only about gifts and dating?", "How can love be flourished?", "Do you fight with him? If yes then why are you

still with him?", "What made you fall in love with him?", "Do you think love is a challenge?", "Will you protest against your parents for marriage?", "Does he have bad qualities? If yes then why do you still love him?", and "Do you think media has an influence on perception of love?" Follow up question asked from the second interviewee having second love affair was "Why did you break up with your previous boyfriend?". The interviews were recorded with participants consent. Later they were transcribed for data analysis.

Analysis

Grounded theory was applied which is a systematic qualitative research method focusing on generation of a theory. The data obtained was analyzed by coding each interview line by line. After obtaining the codes, similar codes denoting the same themes were grouped together to form categories. The categories of both interviews were merged together to see their interrelationships and a theory was formed. The similarities and differences in categories of both the interviews were also seen.

Results

The theory after linking different categories together is divided into three stages. The first stage is characterized by the process of falling in love. Love emerges in the beloved's heart in the absence of her lover. Gradually the bond becomes strong and both are in love. While proceeding in the relationship both become so involved that it results in blind love. This blindness can be seen in neglecting bad qualities of the partner though knowing that they are present and are also annoying (Figure 1). In stage II, there are various factors that lead to happiness. Commitment, romanticism, understanding, honesty, fantasy, expectations, ideal companionship, openness are some of the factors that contribute to happiness. In this stage, the bias against love in family and society also comes in action (Figure 2). In stage III, love continues and ultimately leads to marriage expectations (Figure 3). Details are discussed below in discussion.

Discussion

The theory that has emerged from the interviews is divided into three stages. Each stage shows how love progresses slowly over time and how it is perceived in each stage. Stage I describes that when a man falls in love, he tries to initiate and approach his beloved. He expresses his love and concern showing that he is seeking an intimate relationship. The lover continuously takes care and ensures the well-being of his beloved. Knowing this, the beloved takes him for granted. Initially there is ignorance, ego, and an attitude showing that she really does not care or even believe but at the same time the beloved becomes habitual of someone who really cares and loves her. This awareness occurs in the absence of the lover. When there is no one who gives special importance or takes care then there is realization of the place the lover has in her life. She shows concern and has desire to meet him. This results in an intimate relationship from both sides which ultimately give rise to a love affair. Both the interviewees initially ignored their lovers but as soon as they were out of sight they realized that they really missed them. The interviewee having the first affair reported that "In beginning when he used to say he loves me I used to ignore. Once he was in hospital. I was really worried. I wanted to see and

take care for him but I couldn't".

The interviewee having the second affair reported,

"When he went out of the country for vacations, I really missed him and thought that I cannot live without him. At this point I realized that I love him".

In both of these situations it is the absence of the lover that triggered concern, care, and love in the hearts of the beloveds.

When falling in love there are other things that matter too. The interviewee having first affair reported the presence of care, positive thinking and decision making in her lover as the reason that made her fall in love. She reported,

"I love him because he cares for me, he always thinks for me in positive way. He always takes the right decision for me which turns out to be right".

The interviewee having second affair gave importance to appearance and status. She also heavily gave importance to his ability to understand and thought of it as an important component to increase love. She reported,

"I'm very fussy and problematic and he knows how to handle me, he is very understanding and he knows me well".

Sharing and problem solving were also the important factors involved in love. She reported that

"By sharing my problem it is solved which gives a sense of relief".

She also highlighted the importance of openness, lack of over possessiveness, and independence in her relationship. In her follow up interview she reported that her previous boyfriend was over-possessive and not understanding. She stated that,

Stage I

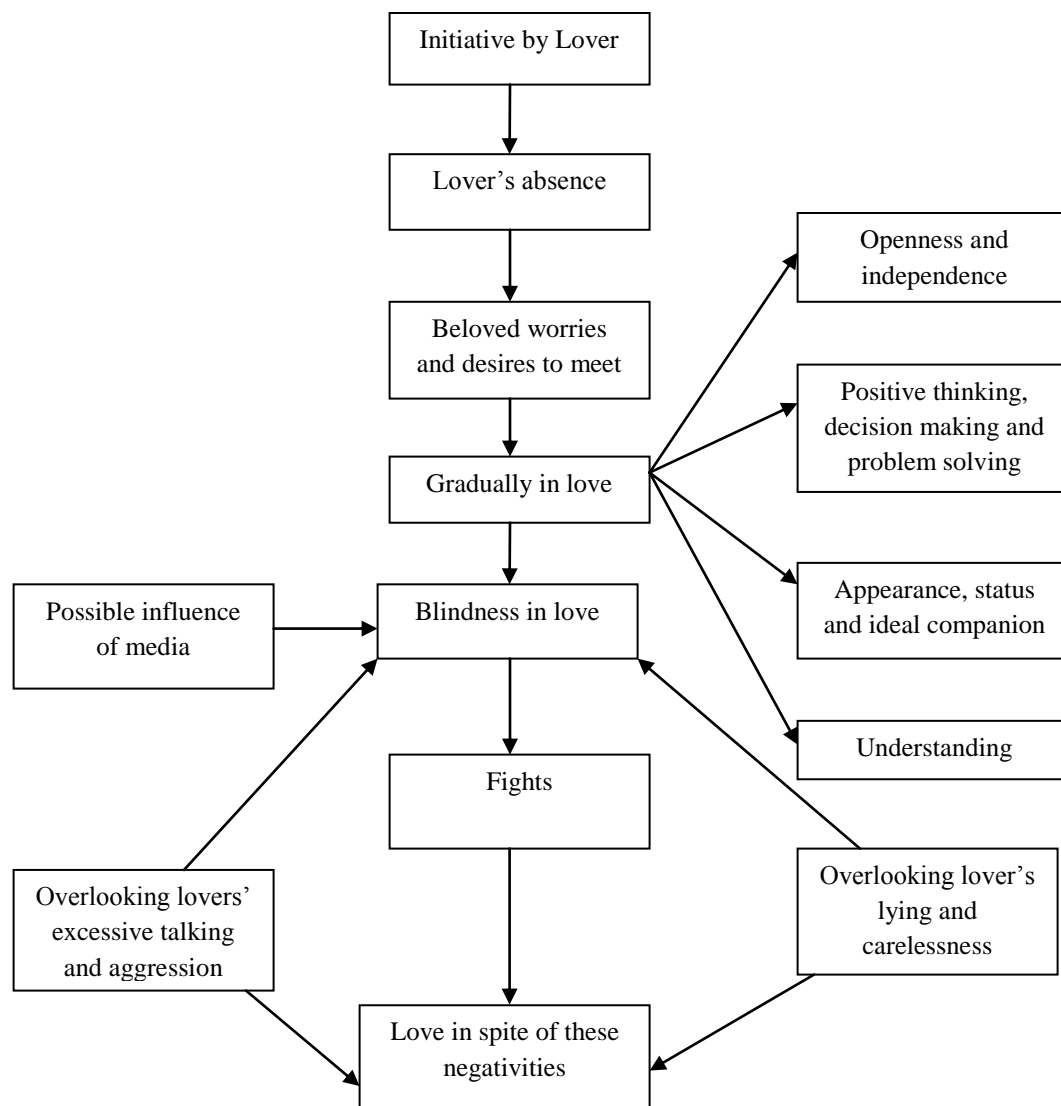


Figure 1. The process of falling in Love (when both partners are in love its results in blind love which can be seen in overlooking bad Qualities in the partner)

Stage II

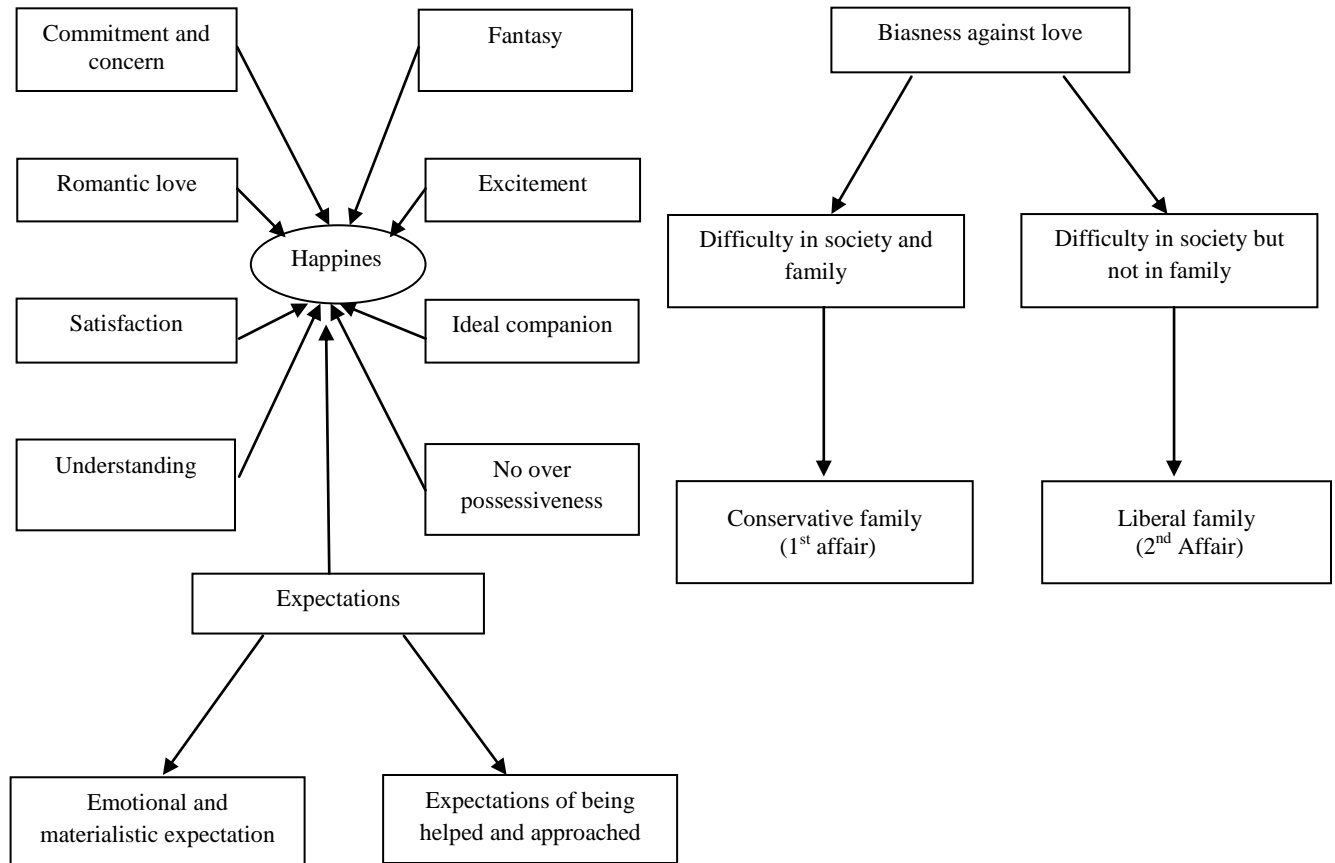


Figure 2. Happiness and Bias in Love going side by side

Stage III

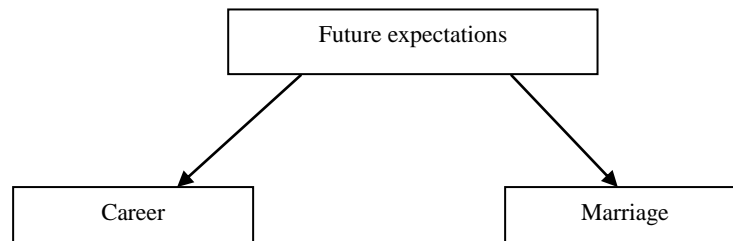


Figure 3. Future expectations in love

"Yes my previous boyfriend was possessive but he didn't show it. He kept it inside and in the end outburst. He was fussy because of his over possessiveness, he even had problem with my dressing. He did not give me space".

The absence of over possessiveness and presence of understanding in the present boyfriend unlike the previous one had

played a major role in boasting love.

After both are in love, the relationship becomes deeper and it results in blind love. This blindness of love could be influenced by media. Both of the interviewee differed in terms of influence of media. The interviewee having her first affair stated that she did have influence of songs. She listened to songs when there was a

fight. She stated,

"Songs do play a role. Enrique's song 'I have given you too much, I'm going to take my love back' influences me a lot when we are fighting".

The interviewee having the second affair reported media to have an artificial portray of love. According to her, media faked love and she was not affected by it. She stated,

"Drama and songs give so much hype to love and fakes it. It gives artificial portray of love but I'm not affected by it"

Both reported to have fights with their partners but in spite of that were still with them and when asked about bad qualities, both affirmed the presence of bad qualities. The interviewee with the first affair reported her partner to be aggressive and having lack of understanding. She stated,

"I cannot talk on the phone for long but he does not understand that and talks a lot. He gives me explanation of an event in detail like from picking up a pen and writing and I hate that".

The interviewee with the second affair told that her partner lied over small things and was carelessness. She stated,

"He is careless he doesn't eat food, doesn't do proper dressing like in cold. He also lies sometimes over small things but later he tells me the truth".

In spite of these bad qualities both of interviewees were still in love. They overlooked their bad qualities and focused only on their good aspects having a positivity bias (Luo, 2007). The interviewee having first affair also said that she thinks about how he should tolerate her anger the way she tolerates his. This shows that she was really annoyed by his aggression and wanted him to understand her anger too but still she was continuing her relationship with him. She even said that she feels lucky to have him and would protest against her parents to marry him. She reported,

"Yes he has bad qualities. He's aggressive but says sorry after that. The reason I still love is because love is blind".

The interviewee having the second affair reported

"I don't give priority to his bad qualities to the extent that I stop loving him. No one is perfect. If he can tolerate my negative qualities so can I".

Thus, the first stage encompasses falling blindly in love to the extent of utterly overlooking negative aspects of one's partner's disposition.

In the second stage, there is happiness when love is at its peak. Both of the interviewees reported that they were happy in their relationship. The factors that led to happiness were commitment and concern which included sincerity, honesty, care, sense of completeness, and concern. Apologizing behavior was also included in this category as a person apologizes to those people about whom he/she cares and is committed to. Commitment and concern led to happiness as it gave a feeling that someone is out there for you, who is sincere and is really concerned. Romanticism was another category reported that contributed to happiness. Satisfaction in term of sincerity, honesty, and a true relationship also enhanced happiness. Understanding was also a positive emotion that flourished love. The interview having her first affair reported,

"In love I feel happy, contented and satisfied".

There were also various expectations in love. The feelings that these expectations gave also led to happiness. Both interviewees reported the presence of emotional expectation in which they expected their partners to help them when they were emotionally disturbed and facing a problem. Interviewee having the first affair stated,

"I expect he would come and see me when I tell him not to. I expect

he would help me in my problem, I expect his calls like saying good morning, calling when my exams ends etc".

She also used to get hurt when expectations were not fulfilled.

The interviewee having second affair reported materialistic expectations. She stated,

"I expect him to relieve me from my disturbance when I'm emotionally disturbed. I also expect regarding materialistic things, e.g., if I need a dress or a watch".

Fantasies were also a source of pleasure and happiness. The interviewee having the first affair reported,

"We fantasize from where we will do our PhD, where will we go like Australia, Sweden or UK. We fantasize how we will take care of our children, at what time we should have them".

The interviewee having the second affair reported,

"Yes there are fantasies. When I meet him I fanaticize our meeting. I initially don't fantasize before meeting. He fantasizes like you will cook food for me, we will go here and there etc. These fantasies give me happiness".

Giving one's partner independence, giving space, and importance in a relationship also contributed to happiness. Both young women characterized giving space to each other as an important element to flourish love. The presence of ideal companionship also reported an important contributing factor of happiness. Interviewee with the first love affair stated,

"Everyone needs a companion. When you find a perfect companion according to you, then you want him at any cost".

The second interviewee reported,

"If you get that property or the checklist you have made in mind then you will fall for that person. Even if in your checklist 2-3 things are absent you will ignore it. Love makes a person blind".

Expression of love was also a factor leading to happiness. Verbal expression, sharing, gifts, dating, and helping were the ways reported by interviewees to express love.

In stage II though there is happiness but society and family always play a role. There is bias against love that results in difficulty in family and society. It was reported by the interviewee having the first affair that she had to defend her boyfriend in front of her family and there were also problems in meeting him. The other interviewee reported to have no problems in family but did report to have problems in society and stated that you can't disclose it to everyone because of bias against it. She also reported that relationships become a major challenge when the time of marriage comes. She stated,

"Love is a challenge. People are biased but my family doesn't say anything. The major challenge is when you want your relationship to be long term like marriage and then there is problem of status, caste, beauty, and job".

In stage III when both the partners are giving happiness to each other, there are dreams and expectations to get married. There is also expectation that the partner will be serious in his career and will take a stand in future. Interviewee having second affair reported,

"I expect that he would become serious about career and future so that he can take stand for me because there is a problem of baradari in his family"

Both the interviewees mostly reported the same things but did differ on some dimensions. The interviewee with second affair reported to have no influence of media at all but the interviewee with the first affair was under the influence of songs. The content of fantasies also varied. The interviewee having the first affair had extensive fantasies like fantasizing about future children and place

to live etc, but the second interviewee only fantasized about their meeting. The positive and negative qualities in their partners and also the kind of family they belonged to differed. The interviewee having first affair did not have a liberal family and had to defend her boyfriend in front of them but interviewee with the second affair had a liberal family. Maybe this was also the reason that after breaking up with her previous boyfriend she got indulged in another relationship as her family was not a problem.

Both the interviews give some knowledge about the perception of love in young adults. It gives an idea that what it is in a love affair that keeps people together. It gives an insight about perception of different factors that are present in love. From the above discussion following hypotheses can be emerged.

1. Romantic love leads to happiness.
2. Romantic love would show positive association with sincerity, commitment, honesty, understanding, care, sharing and money.
3. There would be a negative association between possessiveness and romantic love.
4. Media would have an impact on perception of love.

Limitations

Interview has only been taken from women. The perception of love in young men is not investigated.

Conclusion

This study discusses perception of love and its associated factors in young adults which led to emergence of a three staged theory of love describing how romantic love develops over time. This study has wide implications in society and for parents who could get a clear picture of why do their children get involve in love affairs.

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