

OLDER WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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According to folklore and some recent theorists (see Hatfield & Walster, 1981; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977), the passage of time should have a very different effect on passionate versus companionate love. Passionate love should decline fairly quickly, while companionate love should remain fairly stable over time. To test this hypothesis and others, we interviewed 240 older women, ranging in age from 50 to 82, who had been married varying lengths of time, about their love for their partners and their partners' love for them. The data suggest that folklore and the theorists may be wrong. Time *did* have a corrosive effect on love—but it had an equally corrosive effect on both passionate *and* companionate love.

While the study of love has traditionally been the province of novelists and poets, behavioral scientists in increasing numbers are beginning to investigate this phenomenon (for reviews, see Cunningham & Antill, 1981; Duck & Gilmour, 1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1982; Kelley *et al.*, 1983).

Unfortunately, most of the research in this area has been done with college-age students (see Hatfield & Walster, 1981; Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, in press, for a review of this research). Consequently, little is known about love and intimacy at later stages of the life cycle. Given that an increasing proportion of the population is over 50 years of age, it seems important to research intimacy among the middle-aged and elderly. Furthermore, only by examining rela-

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tionships in such an age group will it be possible to know how love is experienced by couples who have been together for several decades. In general, research indicates that love is the area of greatest marital satisfaction for both older wives and older husbands (see Eshleman, 1978). In a study of 408 older husbands and wives, for example, Stinnett, Carter, and Montgomery (1972) found that a high proportion of the respondents rated their relationships as "very happy" or "happy." In addition, they found that many elderly men and women reported "being in love" as the most important factor in achieving marital success.

DEFINING LOVE

The love feelings experienced for an intimate other have traditionally been dichotomized into two types. The first kind of love is very intense and emotional, and has variously been called "romantic love" (Burgess, 1926; Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972; Rubin, 1970, 1973), "limerence" (Tenno, 1979), and "passionate love" (Hatfield & Walster, 1981; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). The second kind of love is less intense and is based on sharing life's experiences. It has been called "conjugal love" (Burgess, 1926; Driscoll *et al.*, 1972), "affectionate love" (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977), and "companionate love" (Hatfield & Walster, 1981).

We choose the terms "passionate love" and "companionate love" to describe the feelings potentially experienced in the intimate relations of elderly couples. Passionate love has often been described as an intensely emotional state, associated with tender and sexual feelings. One becomes completely preoccupied with the loved one, and desires to give everything to the relationship. Passionate love has also been described as having a negative side. There may be pain and anxiety, for example, if the loved one does not reciprocate in kind. Hatfield and Walster (1981) define passionate love in the following way:

Passionate Love: A state of intense longing for union with an other. Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy. Unrequited love (separation) with emptiness; with anxiety and despair. A state of profound physiological arousal. (p. 9)

Companionate love, on the other hand, is a low-key emotion, with feelings of friendly affection and deep attachment. It has been described as involving friendship, understanding, and a concern for the welfare of the other (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). Hatfield and Walster (1981) define companionate love as "the affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined" (p. 9).

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PASSIONATE AND COMPANIONATE LOVE

According to folklore, women are more loving than are men. Theorists from various disciplines and of every political persuasion have assumed that the cultural stereotype—women love and men work—has a ring of truth (e.g., Langhorn & Secord, 1955; Parsons, 1959; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Even modern feminists agree that love is more important for women than for men. For example, in *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone (1970) writes:

That women live for love and men for work is a truism. . . . Men were thinking, writing, and creating, because women were pouring their energies into those men; women . . . are preoccupied with love. (pp. 126–127)

Dinnerstein (1977) writes:

It has often been pointed out that women depend lopsidedly on love for emotional fulfillment because they are barred from absorbing activity in the public domain. This is true. But it is also true that men can depend lopsidedly on participation in the public domain because they are stymied by love. (p. 70)

The evidence that has been gathered, however, suggests that gender differences in love may be more complicated than originally thought. (See Hatfield, 1982, or Peplau, 1983, for a review of this research.) In general, whether men or women are found to love more passionately or companionately depends on how love is measured. A few studies indicate that women love more passionately than do men (see Dion & Dion, 1973; Kanin, Davidson, & Scheck, 1970). An equal number suggest that men and women do not differ in how passionately they love (see Hatfield, Nerenz, Greenberger, Lambert, & Sprecher, 1982; Rubin, 1973; Sprecher-Fisher, 1980; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981.) Not a single study shows that men love more passionately than do women. When it comes to companionate love, however, the results seem to be clear: Women like and companionately love their partners more than they are liked and companionately loved in return (see Hatfield *et al.*, 1982; Rubin, 1973; Sprecher-Fisher, 1980; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981). Unfortunately, however, all the studies on which these conclusions are based were done with younger men and women. If anything, then, *early in life* women *do* seem to love more—probably more passionately and certainly more companionately—than they are loved in return. No evidence, however, exists to indicate whether these gender differences are also characteristic of older couples.

CHANGES OVER TIME IN LOVE

According to folklore, passionate love lasts for only a short time. If a couple is lucky, passionate love evolves into companionate love. Companionate love is believed to be a more stable kind of love; it can, and often does, last a lifetime. Safilios-Rothschild (1977) writes:

Sometimes romantic passion slowly diminishes in strength and becomes transformed into a stable and tender "affectionate love" that is able to withstand the responsibility, problems, and routine, and even boredom that come with a lasting relationship. (p. 10)

This idea of a linear passage from passion to companionship has been incorporated into stage theories of relationship development. Goldstine, Lerner, Zuckerman, and Goldstine (1977), for example, identified three stages through which relationships pass. Stage 1 is characterized by such symptoms of passionate love as excitement and vulnerability. In Stage 2, there is a period of disillusionment during which passionate love seems to wane. For those couples who reach Stage 3, it is a period in which companionate love becomes more prominent. Expectations for each other are realistic, and there is a sense of security in the relationship. Coleman (1977) identified five stages in relationship development: (1) recognition, (2) engagement, (3) harmony, (4) discordance, and (5) resolution. In the second and third stages, idealization, physical attraction, and other characteristics of passionate love are found to be most intense. In the resolution stage, a more realistic type of love (companionate love) begins to develop. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies exist to suggest that feelings of love do change over the course of a relationship as folklore and stage theories expect (see Cimbalo, Failing, & Mousaw, 1976; Driscoll *et al.*, 1972; Pam, 1970).

Some empirical research, however, suggests that passionate love does not necessarily die as companionate love emerges. These studies, in contrast to the studies cited above, include couples married over 20 years. Knox (1970) interviewed three groups of couples: dating high-school seniors; couples married less than 5 years; and couples married more than 20 years. He found that both the youngest group *and* the oldest group had the most romantic love. Munro and Adams (1978) also found that romantic love was higher for dating couples and for couples married a long time than for young married couples. These authors presented a very ingenious explanation for this curvilinear relationship. They suggest that romantic (or passionate) love is highest when there is low role structure in the relationship. Role structure is especially low

in the early dating period and then late in the marriage when children have left home. Role structure is highest early in a marriage when a household is being established and children are arriving. Finally, Reedy, Birren, and Schaie (1981) and Swensen, Eskew, and Kohlehepp (1981) observe that different aspects of love are important at different stages in the life cycle.

THE DARK SIDE OF LOVE

Theorists have recognized that in intimate relationships, partners may have *both* intensely positive and intensely negative feelings for each other. Such negative feelings as anger, resentment, and depression may be experienced by intimates. Perlmutter and Hatfield (1980) observe that one of the primary characteristics of intimate relationships is intensity.

Intensity of feelings: Intimates care about one another. Most intimates love one another. Of course people are complex and almost often intimate's deepest feelings of love are laced with dislike and hatred. Occasionally intimates hate one another. Some couples have battled intimately for 25 years or more. But whatever it is the intimates feel, they feel intensely. (p. 18)

That negative feelings are an integral part of intimacy is indicated by work done by Braiker and Kelley (1979). In a set of studies, they found that a principal dimension in descriptions married couples give of the development of their relationship is what the researchers called "conflict-negativity." This factor includes feeling angry and resentful toward the partner and communicating negative feelings. These researchers found that the amount of conflict-negativity in the relationships was independent of the amount of love expressed. Those couples who reported high negative feelings were not necessarily less likely to report high love feelings than those couples who reported low negative feelings. The researchers also found that the overall degree of reported conflict-negativity tended to increase and then finally to level off as the relationship progressed.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN NEGATIVE FEELINGS

For some reason, most theorists have not been interested in whether or not there are gender differences in how negatively men and women feel about each other in their intimate relations. No evidence exists to

indicate whether such feelings as anger, resentment, and depression are more likely to be experienced by men or women in their relationships.

CHANGES OVER TIME IN NEGATIVE FEELINGS

In general, research on marital satisfaction over the life cycle has found that husbands and wives have most negative feelings toward each other during the childbearing and child-raising stages. These negative feelings decrease by later stages (Rollins & Feldman, 1970). Other studies, however, indicate that there may not be a decline in negative feelings in later stages of the life cycle (Pineo, 1964; Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975). A touch of conflict may always exist in intimate relationships.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS INVESTIGATION

The present study was designed to explore the issues described above in an age group typically ignored in past research—that of middle-aged and elderly couples. *From the perspective of the female partner of the relationship, we attempt to answer the following four questions:*

1. In the later years of life, who love more passionately and more companionately—men or women?
2. In the later years of life, who have more negative feelings about their relationships—men or women?
3. What effect does length of the relationship have on passionate love versus companionate love, as expressed by women?
4. What effect does length of the relationship have on resentment/hostility and depression, as expressed by women?

METHOD

SAMPLE

In June 1978, as part of a multidisciplinary study of aging women, a random sample of 240 older women from different areas of Madison, Wisconsin were interviewed. The women ranged in age from 50 to 82, and came from a variety of social backgrounds and work statuses. About one-third of the women were working either part-time or full-time. The rest of the women were either presently not working or retired.

In order to determine the sample's representativeness, characteristics of the sample were compared to the national population. Because Madison is an exceptional city in its educational and cultural facilities, its population tends to be more highly educated than populations from other cities. This bias was reflected in the random sample selected. Overall, this group was slightly better off than other American older women. The median annual income for the women was approximately \$2000 higher than the national median income of older women. The respondents were also very highly educated, compared to national averages for older women.

Each of the 240 women in the sample was asked to describe the most important person in her life. If the relationship she described was a sexual one, whether or not it was with a husband, she received the intimacy questions. These are the questions on which the data below are based. Of the 240 women, 106 reported ongoing sexual relationships. For most of these women, their relationships were with their husbands; for a very few, the relationships were with spouse equivalents.

MEASURES

Length of Marriage (Relationship)

We asked women, "What was the date of your marriage?" (In those few instances in which women were cohabitating, we asked what date they and their partner began living together.) On the basis of this information, we divided women into two approximately equal groups: those married a short time (less than 33 years) and those married a longer time (more than 33 years).

Assessing Passionate and Companionate Love

During the interview, we asked women:

People seem to experience two different kinds of love; we call them "passionate love" and "companionate love." Passionate love could be described as a wildly emotional state, with associated tender and sexual feelings, elation and pain, anxiety and relief. Companionate love involves more low-keyed emotion, with feeling of friendly affection and deep attachment. Using the response scale below for each question, and thinking over the last 6 months or so, answer our questions about these feelings in your marriage.

- (1) What is the level of passionate love that you feel for your partner?
- (2) What is the level of passionate love that your partner feels for you?

- (3) What is the level of companionate love that you feel for your partner?
- (4) What is the level of companionate love that your partner feels for you?
 1. None at all
 2. Very little
 3. Some
 4. A great deal
 5. A tremendous amount

Assessing Resentment/Hostility and Depression

Later in the interview, respondents were asked:

Relationships go through stages; sometimes, for a period, the wife feels seething resentment toward her husband—and the way he treats her. At other times she may feel hostile or depressed. Her husband may feel the same way. Sometimes they will express these feelings, other times they will keep them inside. Thinking over the last six months or so:

- (1) What is the level of resentment that you feel toward your partner?
- (2) What is the level of resentment that your partner feels toward you?
- (3) What is the level of hostility that you feel toward your partner?
- (4) What is the level of hostility that your partner feels toward you?
- (5) What is the level of depression that you feel as a result of the relationship?
- (6) What is the level of depression that your partner feels as a result of the relationship?
 1. None at all
 2. Very little
 3. Some
 4. A great deal
 5. A tremendous amount

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We now examine and discuss the results for the questions that we have posed.

WHO LOVE MORE PASSIONATELY AND MORE COMPANIONATELY—MEN OR WOMEN?¹

As shown in Table 1, women perceived that their partners passionately loved them *more* than they loved their partners in return ($t = 2.91$, $p <$

1. In previous studies of dating and newlywed couples, partners reported feeling less passionate than companionate love for each other. Older partners, too, feel less passionate than companionate toward each other. For the women's feelings, $F(1, 103) = 25.89$, $p < .001$; for women's estimates of their husbands' feelings, $F(1, 103) = 16.38$, $p < .001$.

TABLE 1
Women's Feelings for Their Partners and Their Estimates as to Their Partners' Feelings for Them

Number of Respondents	How Much Passionate Love Do You Feel for Your Partner? ^a	How Much Companionate Love Do You Feel for Your Partner? ^a	How Much Resentment and Hostility Do You Feel for Your Partner? ^a	How Much Depression Do You Feel as a Result of the Relationship? ^a
Women's own feelings	3.11	4.10	2.45	1.62
Women's guesses as to their husbands' feelings	3.24	4.08	2.39	1.57
SD	.51	.47	1.02	.50
<i>t</i> tests				
Main effect: Women's feelings versus their guesses as to their husbands' feelings	2.91*	.42	1.22	1.23
<i>df</i>	1, 96	1, 98	1, 92	1, 96

^aThe higher the number, the more passionate love, companionate love, resentment/hostility, or depression the respondent feels or assumes her partner feels.

**p* < .01.

.010). Conversely, no difference was found between how much women companionately loved and how much they perceived their partners companionately loved (*t* = 42, ns).

In previous studies of dating and newlywed couples, researchers have generally found that men and women passionately love each other with approximately the same intensity. Women tend to companionately love their partners more than they are companionately loved in return. In this sample, on the other hand, we secured quite different results. Men were perceived to be *more* passionately in love than were their partners. For the first time, there were no gender differences in companionate love. It appears that in the last stages of life, men and women have come to love each other (companionately) with equal intensity. How can we account for the fact that our results differ so markedly from those found in previous studies with samples of younger adults?

First, we must point out that our data are only suggestive. Because men were not interviewed, we had only the women's perception of how the males felt in the relationship. Perhaps the results are telling us more about gender differences as perceived by older women than about actual gender differences. At a minimum, however, the results tell us that older women feel more passionately loved by their husbands than older women passionately love in return.

However, assuming that the females have accurately assessed how their husbands feel, what can we conclude from the results as we compare them to what has been found with younger men and women?

One possibility is that the results may be suggestive of a possible historical change in the "double-standard." For most elderly people, the term "passionate love" suggests sexual love. In the Victorian era, men were supposed to love sexually, while women were not. Perhaps that is why, in our older sample, we find gender differences in willingness to admit to passionate feelings—differences we might not secure in a more egalitarian sample. (See DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979, for an elaboration of this argument.)

Another possible historical shift is suggested by the results. Because traditionally women were likely to be dependent upon the men they married for status and economic well-being, they have tended not to marry because of passionate emotions. Instead, a woman has had to control her emotional yearnings in order to pursue a relationship with "Mr. Right," the man with the proper social background and the promising potential. Men, on the other hand, traditionally have had the luxury of marrying the women they passionately love. They have also had the freedom to initiate relationships with those they were in love with, while women have had to wait passively for suitors who were interested in them. Safilios-Rothschild (1977) observes:

Women less often than men end up marrying the person they love. In the case of men their own love feelings tend to determine their marital choice more than their partner's feelings. In the case of women the contrary trend has been true: The intensity of the future husband's love feelings carries more weight than their own feelings. There is research evidence that the type of love asymmetry in which the husband is perceived (by both spouses) as the most loving of the two is at least twice as frequent as the reverse asymmetry. (p. 72)

Today, however, women depend less on marriage for their status and financial well-being. They are allowed to pursue educational and career opportunities. It has also become more acceptable for women to initiate relationships with men to whom they are attracted. Thus, it is likely that today young men and women have equal freedom to marry those they passionately love.

One other possible explanation for the results should be considered: The differences may reflect life span differences. At an early age, men and women may love with intense, and almost equal, passion. Later in life, men decline less in passionate feelings than do women. Theorists who have argued that men and women's sexual feelings for their partners should decline at different rates, however, have posited that men should lose sexual interest in their partners *more quickly* than should women (Griffitt, 1981; Symons, 1979). They argue that for men, youth + beauty = sexuality. For women, power + position = sexuality. According to these theorists, men are capable of less passion in old age than are their wives. We find, however, that older men passionately love more than older women. If we are to unravel this perplexing finding, it is clear that more systematic research needs to be conducted—examining a group of women *and* a group of men over a longer period of time.

WHO HAVE THE MOST NEGATIVE FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIPS—MEN OR WOMEN?

In conducting the analyses, we constructed two indexes of negative feelings—resentment/hostility and depression. Because the emotions of resentment and hostility are conceptually close (in that they are both directed toward one's partner), they were averaged to form an index of negative feelings toward the partner. Depression, on the other hand, is not directed toward the partner. Psychologists generally consider it to be "aggression turned inward."

While women reported feeling slightly more resentment/hostility and depression than they perceived their partners as experiencing,

these differences were not significant. As indicated in Table 1, there appears to be no difference in men's versus women's feelings of resentment/hostility and depression.

What may be interesting to examine in a future investigation is whether the *sources* of resentment/hostility and depression experienced in the relationship are different for men and women.

WHAT EFFECT DOES LENGTH OF THE RELATIONSHIP HAVE ON PASSIONATE LOVE VERSUS COMPANIONATE LOVE AS EXPRESSED BY WOMEN?

Ideally, of course, one would answer this question via a longitudinal study. This alternative was not available to us. We thought we could get some useful, suggestive data via the following procedure: In order to test this hypothesis, we utilized a 2x2 factorial analysis of variance design, which included length of marriage (short vs. long) and type of love (passionate vs. companionate love). (In this design, type of love was considered a within-subject factor.)

As folklore and literature suggest, one would expect the passage of time to have different effects on passionate love versus companionate love. Over time, passionate love should decline fairly quickly, while companionate love should remain fairly stable. Thus, we would predict a significant interaction between length of relationship and type of love.

No support, however, was found for this hypothesis (see Table 2). Length of time married *does* have a corrosive effect on love *in general*, $F(1, 94) = 4.07, p < .05$, but it seems to be no more destructive of passionate love than of companionate love; for the interaction between length of relationship and type of love, $F(1, 94) = .01, ns$.

How do we interpret this surprising finding? One can draw an optimistic conclusion or a pessimistic one. The positive side is that even after several years of marriage, the women are still reporting relatively high levels of *both* passionate and companionate love. Women married less than 33 years report feeling between "some" and "a great deal" of passionate love for their partners. Women married much longer continue to feel "some" passionate love and "a great deal" of companionate love. While we expected companionate love to remain uniformly high (or even to increase) throughout the life cycle, the finding that passionate feelings also remain quite high is encouraging. Contrary to what is often portrayed by the mass media, older persons married for several years can still experience excitement and passion in the relationship.

TABLE 2
Women's Feelings for Their Partners and Their Estimates as to Their Partners' Feelings for Them, Broken Down According to Length of Relationship

	Number of Respondents	How Much Passionate Love Do You Feel for Your Partner? ^a	How Much Companionate Love Do You Feel for Your Partner? ^a	How Much Resentment and Hostility Do You Feel for Your Partner? ^a	How Much Depression Do You Feel as a Result of the Relationship? ^a
Women's feelings					
Women married 33 years or less	43-46	3.27	4.24	2.24	1.72
Women married 34 years or more	51-53	2.98	3.98	2.53	1.55
SD		.95	.71	.91	.85
F tests					
Main effect: Length of marriage		2.20	3.37	2.32	.98
df		1, 94	1, 95	1, 92	1, 97
Women's guesses as to their husbands' feelings					
Women married 33 years or less	41-44	3.45	4.23	2.41	1.56
Women married 34 years or more	50-52	3.06	3.94	2.41	1.57
SD		.96	.76	.95	.79
F tests					
Main effect: Length of marriage		4.10*	3.51	.01	.00
df		1, 92	1, 93	1, 90	1, 92

^aThe higher the number, the more passionate love, companionate love, resentment/hostility, or depression the respondent feels or assumes her partner feels.

However, if one wants to interpret the results pessimistically, then emphasis can be given to the significant difference found between women married for less than 33 years and women married for over 33 years. Women married for the longer period of time did report slightly less passionate and companionate love than women married for a shorter period of time.

WHAT EFFECT DOES LENGTH OF THE RELATIONSHIP HAVE ON RESENTMENT/HOSTILITY AND DEPRESSION AS EXPRESSED BY WOMEN?

Length of the relationship seems to have no significant effect on the dark side of love (see Tables 1 and 2). Older women married for less than 33 years expressed between "very little" and "some" resentment/hostility toward their partners and between "none" and "very little" depression about their relationships. Older women married for much longer reported much the same feelings. They still reported feeling between "very little" and "some" resentment/hostility and between "none" and "very little" depression about their relationships. For resentment/hostility, $F(1, 92) = 2.32$, ns; for depression, $F(1, 97) = .98$, ns. The data then, suggest, that throughout their marriage, women feel a small amount of resentment/hostility and depression. "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."

These results are consistent with work done by Braiker and Kelley (1979) on the development of close relationships. They found that while negative feelings increase in the dating stage of the relationship, they level off and do not decrease or increase as the relationship evolves into marriage. Projecting from their findings, we may expect that the level of conflict and negativity does not even change much over several years and decades of marriage. The results here seem to support such a notion.

SUMMARY

This investigation was initiated because of the lack of research on intimacy among older couples. A total of 106 women aged 50 years or older were interviewed about the feelings they had for their husbands or intimate others. They were asked to indicate how much "passionate love" and "companionate love" they felt for their partners and also how much resentment/hostility and depression they experienced in their relationships. The women were also asked a parallel set of ques-

tions referring to how they thought their husbands loved and felt in the relationship.

The following results were found and have been briefly discussed here:

1. As perceived by women, men passionately loved more in the relationship than women. No difference, however, was found between men and women in how much they companionately loved.
2. As perceived by women, no differences were found between men and women in how much resentment/hostility and depression they experienced in the relationship.
3. Length of relationship did not have a more corrosive effect on passionate love than on companionate love for women: Both declined somewhat as length of relationship increased.
4. Length of relationship did not have an effect on the amount of resentment/hostility and depression experienced by women. It appears that throughout marriage, women feel a small amount of resentment/hostility and depression.

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