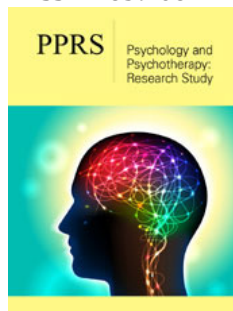


Love and Culture, and How they Affect Each Other: A Commentary

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Commentary

Love, while a universal phenomenon, is significantly influenced by culture, race and ethnicity. This commentary highlights that connection. While love is now seen as universal, Americans have commonly be concerned and occupied with love. At the beginning of the 21st century, anthropologists, clinical psychologists, communication studies, developmental psychologists, evolutionary psychologists, social psychologists, and sociologists, among others, are exploring the nature of love.

People are social animals, and as such they need and want to belong and be part of a caring community. In their plight top respond to that need, humans aim to be part of intimate relationships. Apparently, those who are involved in close intimate relationships, live happier, longer, healthier, and more fulfilling lives [1].

Ours is a “Noah’s Ark” society, where everything goes in twos, and those who are by themselves are often seen -and may feel- to be out of place and alone. Alas, the social conditions, especially those which exist in the Western world are not conducive to developing closeness and intimacy. The Western lifestyle highlights and reinforces separateness and isolation [2]. Romantic relationships are known to reduce or even eliminate loneliness, and enhance people’s feelings of belonging [3].

Examining the way things are in nature, we find that solitary creatures such as giant pandas and porcupines do not seem to need love. They live alone and survive alone, and get together only for the purpose of procreation, after which they go each to his own way. Humans, in contrast, are social animals, who live in groups which assure their survival [4].

Love and Culture

Most people experience love, regardless of the culture to which they belong. Even in societies that attempted to banish love, like in the Oneida society in the 19th century, which viewed love as simply lust, and thus did not condone it, love still flourished. Regardless of cultural background, people commonly distinguish between two kinds of love: “passionate love” which is a powerful emotional state, and “companionate love” which is seen as intensely intimate and longer lasting love. Today, most cultural theorists consider passionate love to be a universal emotion and is perceived similarly all over the world, transcending culture and time [5].

However, cultural differences do influence young people’s attitudes, emotions, and behaviours. For example, Americans and Italians seem to equate love with happiness and therefore, passionate and companionate love are viewed as intensely pleasurable experiences. Chinese youngsters, on the other hand, view love as less exciting and pleasurable [6]. Hatfield

and Rapson [7] concluded that “cultural traditions and values may affect romantic visions, how one describes one’s feelings when in love, how demonstrative people are in displaying their love, but the fact of passionate love may indeed be a cultural universal based on similarities in the architecture of the mind and a common neural substrate” (p. 16).

Couples who belong to different racial, ethnic, and/or religious backgrounds, often experience increased stress and dissatisfaction resulting in higher rates of separation and divorce. In many cultures, it is the families that arrange marriages [8]. Levin et al. [9] noted that “In India, for example, romantic love and intense emotional attachment is typically seen as a threat to the family structure. Far from bolstering the joint family, it often disrupts it” (p. 355). In their study, Levin et al. [9] found that culture influenced the perceived importance of love as a central cause for establishing a marital union. Love received the most significance importance in the Western and Westernized nations (the United States, followed by Brazil, England, and Australia) while in Eastern nations such as India, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines, it is less significant.

Levin et al. [9] found a high correlation between individualistic cultures - such as the American one is, and love being essential to marriage, while it was much lower in collectivistic cultures. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, in the 19th century, pragmatic reasons, such as financial arrangements between the couple’s families, dictated who got married to whom and when. That changed when the preference of marital reasons to seeking romantic love in the future union became central in marital unions.

To conclude, love was always a central feature in human existence. Starting in biblical times and leading to modern psychology, love was perceived as a central ‘ingredient’ in enriching people’s lives. Love may not come easy, and once we find it, it may be subject to various life trials and tribulations that people commonly encounter, but there is a clear indication that love is essential for healthy physical and emotional functioning.

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