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Does a Long-Term Relationship Kill Romantic Love?

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This article examines the possibility that romantic love (with intensity, engagement, and sexual interest) can exist in long-term relationships. A review of taxonomies, theory, and research suggests that romantic love, without the obsession component typical of early stage romantic love, can and does exist in long-term marriages, and is associated with marital satisfaction, well-being, and high self-esteem. Supporting the separate roles of romantic love and obsession in long-term relationships, an analysis of a moderately large data set of community couples identified independent latent factors for romantic love and obsession and a subsample of individuals reporting very high levels of romantic love (but not obsession) even after controlling for social desirability. Finally, a meta-analysis of 25 relevant studies found that in long- and short-term relationships, romantic love (without obsession) was strongly associated with relationship satisfaction; but obsession was negatively correlated with it in long-term and positively in short-term relationships.

> One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry.
>
> —Oscar Wilde

In contemporary Western culture, romantic love is deemed an important part of marriage. Many individuals view romantic love as a basis to marry (Dion & Dion, 1991) and its disappearance as grounds to terminate marriage (Simpson, Campbell, & Berscheid, 1986). Increasingly, romantic love and marriage have come to be viewed as a source of self-fulfillment and expression (Dion & Dion, 1991). Ironically though, it is widely believed that over time romantic love fades and that at best it evolves into a "warm afterglow" (Reik, 1944) of companionate love, a friendship-type love. How then, could something that is considered critical, if not the purpose of marrying, also be assumed to die out inevitably?

Psychologists, therapists, and laypeople have puzzled over the possibility of romantic love in long-term marriages. Some have assumed that very high levels of romantic love in long-term relationships might be inefficient, being metabolically costly (e.g., Fisher, 2006) and perhaps even deterring the lover from familial, work, and community obligations. Perhaps others have been swayed by media reports highlighting the dark side of love and marriage (e.g., high divorce rates, infidelity, stalking, domestic violence, etc.). Last, maintaining the assumption that romantic love cannot last allows those with good, but not stellar relationships to maintain the status quo and avoid being threatened by the possibility of high levels of love in long-term relationships. Indeed, this is perhaps a rational strategy (even if based on a myth) given that relationship well-being appears to be significantly benefited by downward social comparison with other couples (Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000). Or perhaps, as proposed by Mitchell (2002), love could be enduring, but in an attempt to guarantee safety and minimize risks of having unrealistic assumptions about the certainty of the relationship, individuals dull romantic love over time.

Determining whether romantic love can thrive over time, and if so, what it is like in long-term relationships, is important for understanding basic relationship principles, their applications, and evolutionary foundations. For example, the possibility of romantic love in long-term relationships would suggest that the field needs to consider more than the absence of problems and conflict (the main focus of most current marital literature). The possibility of long-term romantic love may also shift therapists' and individuals' perceptions, so they set higher expectations, and so that long-term mates are less likely to seek out alternative partners or terminate relationships rather than face what has seemed like impossible challenges to achieve romantic love in their marriages. Moreover, this presumes people are willing to commit to long-term relationships at all. The assumption that time kills romantic love may undermine people's decisions even to enter into marriages.

In this article we argue that romantic love—with intensity, engagement, and sexual interest—can last. Although it does not usually include the obsessional qualities of early stage love, it does not inevitably die out or at best turn into companionate love—a warm, less intense love, devoid of attraction and sexual desire. We suggest that romantic love in its later and early stages can share the qualities of intensity, engagement, and sexual liveliness. We briefly review relevant taxonomies, theoretical perspectives, and research; present new analyses of an existing data set of long-term couples; report a meta-analysis of the association of relationship satisfaction with romantic love in long and short-term relationships; review studies of long-term love's relation to individual well-being; and conclude with implications for theory, research, and applications.

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Taxonomies, Theoretical Perspectives, and Research

Taxonomies

Berscheid and Hatfield (1969), pioneers in the scientific exploration of love, proposed two major types of love—passionate and companionate. Passionate love, "a state of intense longing for union with another" (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993, p. 5), also referred to as "being in love" (Meyers & Berscheid, 1997), "infatuation" (Fisher, 1998), and "limerence" (Tennov, 1979), includes an obsessive element, characterized by intrusive thinking, uncertainty, and mood swings. The very widely used Passionate Love Scale (PLS; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) includes obsessive items (e.g., "Sometimes I feel I can't control my thoughts; they are obsessively on my partner;" "I sometimes find it difficult to concentrate on work because thoughts of my partner occupy my mind"). Companionate love, less intense than passionate love, combines attachment, commitment, and intimacy. It is defined as "the affection and tenderness we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined" (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969, p. 9); and refers to deep friendship, easy companionship, the sharing of common interests and activities, but not necessarily including sexual desire or attraction (e.g., Grote & Frieze, 1994). A widely accepted view is that over time there is a linear passage of passionate love into companionate love (Hatfield & Walster, 1978).

Another prominent taxonomy, Love Styles (Lee, 1977; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), delineates six basic styles of which three are directly relevant here: (a) Eros or romantic love, an intense focus, valuing, and desire for union with the beloved, without obsession; (b) Mania or obsessive love in which "The lover is jealous, full of doubt about the partner's sincerity and commitment, subject to physical symptoms such as inability to eat and sleep, experiences acute excitement alternating with debilitating depression" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992, p. 66); and (c) Storge or friendship love, a feeling of natural affection, a secure, trusting, friendship (often experienced toward siblings or friends) that does not involve sexual desire and is akin to companionate love. Eros and Mania together correspond to Berscheid and Hatfield's (1969) definition of passionate love and its operationalization in the PLS. Storge, corresponds to Berscheid and Hatfield's definition of companionate love. In this article, we refer to "Romantic love" as a rough equivalent to Eros (with intensity, attraction, engagement, and sexuality), without Mania (or obsession), and as distinguishable from a calmer, friendship-type attachment (companionate love or Storge).

A third influential taxonomy, Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory, conceptualizes love as consisting of three components—passion, intimacy, and commitment—of which different combinations result in different types of love. Passionate love is derived from a combination of intimacy and passion, without commitment; infatuated love, from passion without commitment or intimacy; and fatuous love, from passion and commitment, without intimacy. Sternberg argued that over the course of successful relationships, passion generally decreases, latent intimacy increases, and commitment increases then levels off; the rapid development of passion is generally followed by habituation in which people reach a more or less stable, low level of arousal toward their beloved.

Theoretical Perspectives

Many models of love imply that over time romantic love inevitably declines and, at best, evolves into some kind of friendship or companionate love. Social science models (e.g., Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969; Sternberg, 1986) emphasize habituation and familiarity, unavoidable interdependence conflicts, and the like. Other approaches describe mechanisms that can promote an occasional existence of romantic love in long-term relationships. Berscheid's (1983) interruption model predicts that temporary interruptions, such as brief separations and conflicts, may reignite latent passionate love (including its obsessive element). The self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986) proposes that there are natural mechanisms that may promote long-term romantic love—such as shared participation in novel and challenging activities (e.g., Aron et al., 2000). Similarly, the rate of change in intimacy model (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999) suggests that if couples have opportunities to increase intimacy at a rapid pace, it may also increase passion. Finally, recent evolutionary models propose that long-term romantic love may be an adaptation that promotes continued pair-bonding, keeping partners together even when problems or desirable alternatives present themselves (Buss, 2006). Other evolutionary work suggests that distinct systems evolved for mating, romantic attraction, and long-term attachments (Fisher, 1998); that in general, romantic attraction fades, but may exist in some cases serving to keep older couples energetic, optimistic, and with a companion (Fisher, 2006).

Research

Two key qualitative studies suggest that romantic love may be experienced for a long-term partner. In their classic interview study of nearly 500 American middle-class marriages of 10 years or more, Cuber and Haroff (1965) distinguished between "intrinsic" couples, who continued to enjoy deep, intimate, and affectionate connections with their partners and "utilitarian" couples, who maintained the bond for other reasons than to experience deep involvement with their spouse. Two subgroups of intrinsic couples were identified: "vital" couples, those intensely bound in important life matters with enjoyment, and "total" couples, those with many points of vital meshing shared mutually and enthusiastically. Tennov (1979) conducted hundreds of interviews with individuals reporting being intensely in love and observed that many older people in happy marriages replied affirmatively to being in love, but unlike those in "limerant" relationships, they did not report continuous and intrusive thinking. There have also been a number of relevant quantitative surveys that lead to the same conclusion, with three bearing directly on whether romantic/passionate love lasts. One interview study by Hatfield, Traupmann, and Sprecher (1984) found that women, aged 50 to 82, in long-term relationships (33 years or more) reported high levels ($M = 2.98$ on a 5-point scale) of passionate love (described as a wildly emotional state, with tender and sexual feelings, elation and pain, anxiety and relief), although slightly lower levels than

compared with women in shorter relationships (<33 years, $M = 3.27$). In another study, Tucker and Aron (1993) found high levels of passionate love (PLS) across family life cycles (marriage, parenthood, and empty nest), with only slight decreases, even when controlling for marital satisfaction. Montgomery and Sorrell (1997) investigated love styles among four family life stages and found no significant differences in romantic love (Eros) from single in-love youth to those married with and without children living at home.

Factor Analysis of the Passionate Love Scale in Long-Term Relationships

The PLS, as we have noted, includes items that assess both romantic love and obsession. The PLS has proven itself to be a valid, reliable, and unifactorial measure in the context of new relationships (Aron et al., 2005; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). However, comingling romantic love and obsession may be problematic in the context of long-term relationships. To examine this issue, we assembled a data set large enough to conduct a factor analysis, consisting of Study 5 from Aron et al. (2000), plus data from three follow-up experiments (currently being prepared for submission), yielding 156 heterosexual couples (312 individuals) recruited from the Long Island, NY, community (M relationship length = 8.84 years ($SD = 4.98$). In each study, participants: completed a pretest including 15 items from the PLS, Hendrick's (1988) Generic Measure of Relationship Satisfaction, and seven items from Edmonds' (1967) Martial Conventionalization Scale (assesses social desirability in the marital context); participated in a joint activity that differed across studies; and completed a posttest including the remaining 15 PLS and 8 Conventionalization items. All posttest PLS and Conventionalization scores were adjusted within study for experimental condition; all pre- and posttest measures were adjusted between studies, for study.

We first conducted a factor analysis (principal components extraction) of the entire data set for adjusted PLS scores. A scree test yielded a clear two-factor solution (first six eigenvalues: 10.16, 2.24, 1.61, 1.45, 1.33, 1.26). Following varimax rotation, items on Factor 1 with very high loadings (≥.60) corresponded to romantic love or Eros (e.g., "I want my partner—physically, emotionally, and mentally," "For me, my partner is the perfect romantic partner," "I would rather be with my partner than anyone else," "I sense my body responding when my partner touches me," "My partner can make me feel effervescent and bubbly," and "I possess a powerful attraction for my partner"). Factor 2 corresponded closely to obsession or Mania (e.g., "I sometimes find it difficult to concentrate on work because thoughts of my partner occupy my mind" and "Sometimes I feel I can't control my thoughts; they are obsessively on my partner."). The factor analysis results were virtually identical in every respect when the following were analyzed separately: women and men, those together more than 2 years or together more than 4 years, whether missing values were excluded pairwise or listwise, whether principal components or principal axis factoring were used, and whether orthogonal or oblique rotations were used.

We next constructed scales from items with highest loadings on each factor (alphas .93 and .65, respectively). The correlation between these two scales was moderate ($r = .35$; controlling for relationship length and social desirability, partial $r = .27$); neither was correlated with relationship length in this data set, which included only couples married for at least a year or more (rs = .06 and .02, respectively; controlling for social desirability, .08 and .03). Factor 1 (romantic love) was strongly correlated with marital satisfaction (rs = .52 overall, .55 for women, .49 for men; controlling for social desirability and relationship length, prs = .44, .46, .42; all ps < .001); Factor 2 (obsession) was not (r and pr = .04). Entering both factors simultaneously, Factor 1 continued to have strong betas (rs = .58, .60, .55; prs = .52, .53, .52; all ps < .001). Factor 2 (obsession) displayed small to moderate, significant negative beta (rs = −.17, −.15, −.17: prs = −.18, −.17, −.19; all ps < .05). The correlations (and all partial correlations and betas) of the two factors with satisfaction were significantly different (all ps < .001).

The near-zero correlations with relationship length for romantic love further supports the idea that romantic love can exist in long-term relationships. Results from the factor analysis and correlations with satisfaction support the notion that in long-term relationships, romantic love and obsession are quite distinct: Romantic love (without obsession) is positively associated with relationship satisfaction, but the obsessive aspect is negatively associated with it.

We also examined the proportion reporting intense romantic love. We identified individuals who on each PLS factor scale rated all items as 6s (the highest possible value), even after controlling for social desirability (i.e., mean raw score residual predicting from social desirability score ≥6). (To be conservative, we only considered pretest PLS items; posttest items may have been affected by experimental condition and controls for condition make ambiguous what should count as a 6. However, results were virtually identical including posttest items.) Key result: 42 (13%) of the 312 participants gave all 6s to every romantic love (Factor 1) item, even after controlling for social desirability. Their mean relationship length (8.39 years) was virtually identical to the overall mean. For obsession (Factor 2), for which it was easier to have all 6s by chance (there were fewer items), only six individuals (2%) gave the highest possible answer to each question after controlling for social desirability; none of these six overlapped with the 42 in the first group; their time together and gender was about the same as for the extreme romantic love group and the overall sample. This additional analysis, while having its limits, adds to our confidence that intense romantic love—with engagement, centrality to life, and sexual liveliness—can and does exist in a nontrivial proportion of long-term relationships; but intense obsession is much rarer and largely unrelated to intense romantic love.

Meta-Analysis of Love Types and Satisfaction in Short and Long-Term Relationships

A recent meta-analysis (Masuda, 2003) of 33 studies, including both short and long-term relationships and various measures, found substantial correlations of romantic love with relationship satisfaction (weighted mean correlation = .64, range = .10 to .77). Masuda reported that correlations were consistent across measures and concluded that various measures of passionate and romantic love assess the same construct. These results are not surprising given the great deal of overlap between various measures of

romantic love and that the meta-analysis aggregated studies with samples from dating, middle-school students to married individuals with and without children out of the nest. Thus, the present meta-analysis attempted to examine correlations of love with satisfaction *separately* by relationship stage and *separately* by constructs of love.

Method

Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies were searched that assessed both satisfaction and one of the focal types of love in samples of college age or older in a romantic relationship. Romantic love without obsession and obsessive love by itself were coded from measures including the Eros and Mania subscale, respectively, of the LAS or the similar SAMPLE (Laswell & Laswell, 1976). Romantic love with obsession was coded from the PLS, the Passion subscale of Sternberg's (1997) Triangular Love Scale, and similar measures. Companionate love was coded, following Masuda (2003), from Rubin's (1970) Love Scale (assesses attachment, caring, and intimacy), Lund's (1985) short Love Scale, the Storge subscale of the LAS and SAMPLE, and the Triangular Love Scale Intimacy subscale. Relationship satisfaction was coded from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), the Relationship Rating Form (RRF; Davis & Todd, 1985), Rusbult's (1983) relationship satisfaction scale, and original items (such as global items). Effect sizes were computed separately for short-term and long-term relationships. The short-term group included studies reporting on samples of college students, mostly single or dating. Studies with samples that included subsets of engaged, cohabiting, or married participants were also assigned to the short-term group if they met *all* three of the following conditions: (a) such participants comprised less than the majority of the sample, (b) the average relationship length overall was less than 4 years, and (c) participants were mostly college-age (18–23 years old). The long-term relationship group included studies assessing middle-aged participants (typically married 10 years or more). (If relationship status could not be determined or the sample was quite heterogeneous and did not report effect sizes separately by relationship stage or length, the study was not included in our meta-analysis.)[1]

Results

Our search yielded 25 independent studies that met inclusion criteria, yielding a total of 17 short-term samples and 10 long-term samples (two studies had both short and long-term samples). Table 1 displays a summary of the effect sizes for the two groups by love type. Associations between romantic love and satisfaction were similar and large for both short and long-term groups ($Q = .21$, $p > .10$). Companionate love correlations with satisfaction were moderate (smaller than romantic love with satisfaction) and were significantly greater for the long-term than the short-term samples ($Q = 86.79$, $p < .001$). Passionate love (romantic love with obsession) had large correlations there were slightly larger for the short-term group ($Q = 3.62$; $p < .10$). Finally, obsessive love's correlation with satisfaction was small but positive for short-term and small but negative for long-term; these were significantly different ($Q = 7.10$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The strong and similar association between romantic love (without obsession) and satisfaction in short and long-term relationships highlights its importance in both formation and maintenance phases. Companionate love was moderately correlated with satisfaction in short-term relationships and slightly more so in long-term relationships, highlighting the greater relevance of a calm, friendship-type, attachment to the success of long-term relationships. For Passionate love (romantic love *with* obsession), the pattern was the reverse, with short-term displaying a nearly significantly larger association with satisfaction (.55) than long-term (.46). This suggests that passionate love is closely tied with relationship satisfaction at all phases, but somewhat more so in the early stages. This may be a reflection of the undermining of passionate love scores for the long-term relationship group by its inclusion of the obsessive aspect. This idea is clearly supported by the small positive association of obsessive love with satisfaction in short-term samples but the slight negative association in the long-term samples.

Long-Term Romantic Love and Well-Being

If romantic love—intense, engaging, and sexual—does exist in long-term relationships (and does not just turn into companionship), is it associated with general well-being? We have seen that romantic love seems to be a good thing for the relationship. Nevertheless, is this just a folie-a-deux? Is it also good for the individuals involved and those around them? A number of studies have found that just being married is associated with subjective well-being (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). With regard to love in those marriages, studies suggest that it is also an important predictor of happiness, positive emotions, and life satisfaction (e.g., Diener & Lucas, 2000, who assessed love in general; Kim & Hatfield, 2004, who used the PLS). However, problems related to marriage (e.g., jealousy, control, and domestic violence) might suggest that a great deal of obsession in marriage might be maladaptive, or at the least distracting, steering a passionate couple away from fulfilling parental and occupational duties, socializing with friends, family, and the community.

Well-Being

Marital satisfaction predicts global happiness, above and beyond other types of satisfaction (e.g., Glenn & Weaver, 1981); predicts psychological well-being and physical health (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999); and may serve as a buffer to stressful life events (e.g., Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006; Treboux, Crowell, & Waters, 2004). Correspondingly, low quality

[1] Additional methods details are provided in the online Suppl., including search procedures, inclusion criteria, coding, handling multiple effect sizes within studies, and effect-size computation methods. Also included in the Suppl. are references for the included studies and tables of their sample characteristics and effect sizes. Suppl. information can be found at: http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/gpr/Supplementary_Materials_MS_3403508.pdf

Table 1
Results of Meta-Analyses: Mean Aggregate Effect Sizes of Love Types With Relationship Satisfaction for Short-Term Relationships and Long-Term Relationships

	Short-term group				Long-term group			
Love type	*N*	*k*	*r*	*SD*	*N*	*k*	*r*	*SD*
Romantic love	3256	13	.55	.21	1419	7	.56	.26
Companionate love	3388	14	.26	.28	1905	9	.48	.41
Passionate love	1836	5	.55	.13	302	2	.46	.23
Mania	2958	12	.08	.13	889	6	−.02	.12

Note. N = Total sample size; k = number of independent studies; r = average effect size; SD = Standard deviation.

marital bonds are predictive of depression (e.g., Beach & O'Leary, 1993) and marital dissolution (e.g., Huston et al., 2001). How much of this has to do specifically with romantic love? A study comparing normative versus distressed married couples in long-term relationships (M = 19 years) found that "love" (defined as a deep emotional bond, mutual caring and attraction, together with trust and closeness) ranked as the highest of 19 variables discriminating between the normative and distressed groups (Riehl-Emde, Thomas, & Willi, 2003). Other studies have also suggested strong and significant links between romantic love (even when measured with the PLS) with overall happiness in life (Aron & Henkemeyer, 1995), and lower psychological symptoms, greater life satisfaction, and better physical health (Traupmann, Eckels, & Hatfield, 1982).

Self-Esteem

Several theorists have suggested self-esteem plays an important role in relationships and specifically in relation to romantic love. For example, Hendrick and Hendrick (1992) describe Eros (romantic love) as "self-confidence and high self-esteem which allow an intense, exclusive focus on a partner but not possessiveness or jealousy" (p. 64). In contrast, Mania (obsession) is described as being full of insecurity and doubt and related to relationship turbulence, dissatisfaction, and obsession. Consistent with this idea, several studies report that self-esteem is moderately positively associated with higher Eros and lower Mania scores (e.g., Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Dion & Dion, 1988; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986, Hendrick, 1988). The direction of causality could be from self-esteem to love. For example, adults classified as "secure" according to attachment theory models, tend to report higher self-esteem (e.g., Feeney & Noller,1990; Treboux et al., 2004), and endorse mutual support and development (e.g., Ainsworth, 1991; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002). Thus, having the felt security that a partner is "there for you," not only makes for a smooth functioning relationship but also may facilitate feelings of romantic love. In contrast, individuals classified as insecure are less effective at using and providing a consistent secure base for their partners, have lower satisfaction and greater conflict in relationships, and also report lower self-esteem. Such events may heighten feelings of insecurity about the relationship, and could manifest as obsessive love.

General Discussion

Many major theories of romantic love propose that it inevitably diminishes over time (e.g., Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969; Sternberg, 1986); other models have suggested mechanisms and functions for the maintenance of romantic love in long-term relationships (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986; Berscheid, 1983; Buss, 2006; Fisher, 2006). The few directly relevant studies suggests that it is indeed a real phenomenon (e.g., Tucker & Aron, 1993; Hatfield et al., 1984), even when comparing romantic love between single, in-love youth with married adults (e.g., Montgomery & Sorrell, 1997). Extensive in-depth interviews also suggest that some individuals sustain deeply connected, intense, sexually alive relationships with a long-term partner, but without including obsessive elements (e.g., Cuber & Haroff, 1965; Tennov, 1979). We suggest that both a major reason for the assumption romantic love cannot exist in long-term relationships and confusion in the relevant literature is the mixing of romantic love with passionate love (defined based on new relationships) as including high obsession, uncertainty, and anxiety. By disentangling these constructs in a factor analysis, decades of research can be unraveled to suggest that romantic love—including intensity, interest, and sexuality—thrives in some enduring relationships, while obsession is much less common and unrelated to romantic love in long-term relationships.

We also explored the associations between romantic love with and without obsession and relationship satisfaction. Results from our meta-analysis of 25 studies showed that romantic love was strongly correlated with relationship satisfaction in both short and long-term relationships, whereas obsessive love was slightly correlated with relationship satisfaction in new relationships but very slightly negatively correlated with it in long-term relationships. Moreover, in no study is there evidence that romantic love is negatively associated with satisfaction. This is contrary to some views that romantic love, if it does occur in a long-term relationship, may be maladaptive. Of course, one cannot completely rule out the possibility that being highly passionate in a long-term marriage could undermine familial or social responsibilities. (Interestingly, Bataille, 1962, argued that life should be primarily about meaningful, intense engagement, and thus romantic love is a good thing that does undermine the social status quo, and for just that reason has been suppressed.)

Limitations and Future Directions

Research on love and relationships has advanced significantly in the last few decades, but several issues remain to be addressed. Most studies of long-term relationships (including the major longitudinal studies) have not even measured romantic love. The few studies that have done so have been mainly cross-sectional. Another issue is

sentiment override (Weiss, 1980)—happy participants respond in positive ways to everything about their relationship. Our meta-analysis however found that effect sizes for types of love and relationship satisfaction differed across short and long-term relationship groups, suggesting that respondents do discriminate between love types and select varying degrees, not just high or low scores across the board. A related concern is social desirability. However, our reanalysis of the Long Island couple data set found that controlling for relationship-relevant social desirability minimally affected the obtained results. Nevertheless, more objective measures (implicit, physiological, neuroscience) will be a useful future direction. Finally, future research may aim to recruit more representative and culturally diverse samples, thus addressing the possibility that results are biased by self-selection of happy couples or Western values.

Conclusion

Contrary to what has been widely believed, long-term romantic love (with intensity, sexual interest, and engagement, but without the obsessive element common in new relationships), appears to be a real phenomenon that may be enhancing to individuals' lives—positively associated with marital satisfaction, mental health, and overall well-being. These conclusions suggest a dramatic revision of some theories and careful attention to measures of love that include or exclude obsession. In terms of real-world implications, the possibility of intense long-term romantic love sets a standard that couples (and marital therapists) can strive for that is higher than seems to have been generally considered realistic. This could also be distressing for long-term couples who have achieved a kind of contented, even happy—but not intensely romantic—status quo, assuming it is the best anyone can expect. Couples benefit from downward social comparison with other couples and will even distort their evaluation of their own relationship to an objectively unrealistically positive view (Rusbult et al., 2000). Yet, a shocking recognition of possibilities, that a long-term marriage does not necessarily kill the romance in one's relationship, may give some couples the inspiration they need, even if challenging, to make changes that will enhance their relationship quality (and thus general well being).

Could Oscar Wilde be wrong?

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