

# NORMATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF ROMANTIC LOVE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Allen L. Tan and Robert J. Morais

*Ateneo de Manila University*

*This study attempted to discover what a group of American college students considered the ideal love relationship. Sixty males and 60 females judged hypothetical romantic role pairs along 28 role differential scales. Data analyses showed that subjects expected married couples to display more absorption and dependence as well as warmth without idealization relative to unmarried couples; males also expected more sensitivity. Female subjects prescribed more sensitivity and warmth from men than men thought they should exhibit; males prescribed more absorption and dependence, and approach-avoidance from women. Women also seemed more concerned that their independence be respected. It was suggested that as American women assume more independence, they expect both sexes to display equal amounts of romantic behavior.*

## NORMATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF ROMANTIC LOVE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

A number of well known writers have described what they consider to be an ideal love relationship. Erikson (1950), finds a mutual calibration of mood and activity to be essential. To Fromm (1956), qualities such as giving, care, respect, and responsibility are most important. Both Erikson and Fromm agree that the retention of one's identity is a prerequisite to successful intimacy. Maslow (1970), as part of his studies on self-actualized persons, notes that love among such people had certain definite characteristics. These include mutual openness, the pooling of needs, and a sense of fun and gaiety, among others. Rubin (1970), attempted to develop a scale of romantic love and found that many of these qualities do in fact discriminate between feelings of love as opposed to mere liking for another individual.

This study is an attempt to discover what a group of American college students consider to

be the ideal romantic love relationship. It was undertaken in light of the changing social and economic roles of women in American society (cf. Deckard, 1975; Huber, 1973). Many women in contemporary American are approaching economic independence (Deckard, 1975). Young, educated women in particular are supportive of women's rights issues (Welch, 1975:222) and favor a re-examination of sex roles. We expected these ideas to be reflected in their conceptions of the ideal romantic relationship.

The association between the sexes' respective economic roles and romantic love has been examined by Coppinger and Rosenblatt (1968), Rosenblatt (1970), and Dion and Dion (1973). Coppinger and Rosenblatt conducted a cross-cultural study of subsistence interdependence of spouses and their orientation toward romantic love. They discovered that in societies where man and woman could survive economically without one another romantic love was important in securing the marital bond. On

the other hand, in societies where couples depend on each other economically, romantic love was not important. Coppinger and Rosenblatt reasoned that couples in the latter type of societies do not require romantic love as a foundation for their marital alliance, which instead finds strength in mutual material assistance. Rosenblatt (1970) further suggested that when a woman is economically dependent on a man it is to her interest to stress romantic love in order to de-emphasize her economic alliance on her spouse. Regarding this hypothesis, Dion and Dion (1973) found that American women, who traditionally play a minor economic role relative to their spouse, tend to exhibit more "pragmatic love" than do American men; i.e. they use romantic love as an inducement for men to agree to marry them as the women offer no material input of their own.

Given the changes in women's roles noted by Deckard (1975) and discussed in Huber (1973), and the considerations noted above, it would be reasonable to expect that college women today would prescribe romantic equality between the sexes in correspondence to their increasing equality in economic behavior. Men, on the other hand, while acknowledging the changing economic role of women seem unsure as to how to react to it (cf. Komarovsky, 1973: 88). We hoped this study would shed some light on the way they feel about romantic relationships within the context of these changes.

The main goal of the present study, therefore, was to determine what differences exist between the sexes in their conceptions of the ideal way in which romantic partners should act towards one another. This was accomplished by having male and female college students judge hypothetical role pairs in romantic days.

In the process of eliciting these judgments, another variable was included: having subjects judge married or unmarried romantic partners (i.e. judging husband-wife pairs or boyfriend-girlfriend pairs). This was included for two reasons. First, a husband-wife pair might be seen as having a firmer commitment to one another and might therefore be expected to exhibit some

of the behaviors described by Erikson, Fromm, and Maslow to a greater degree. On the other hand, boyfriend-girlfriend pairs in a premarital state are usually seen to have more of a romantic aura about them, especially in popular fiction. We were therefore curious to see if subjects would prescribe different behaviors for married vs. unmarried couples as role pairs.

To achieve these goals, the use of role differentials seemed particularly appropriate. Role differentials were developed by Triandis (1972) as a means of determining how people expect one member of a role pair to act towards the other member along a number of scales or dimensions. A more detailed description of their use appears in the next section.

## METHODOLOGY

The basic design used in this research was 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design. The three independent variables were: (1) male vs. female subjects; (2) the marital status of the stimulus pairs, i.e., judging hypothetical husband-wife vs. boyfriend-girlfriend pairs; and (3) the sex of the stimulus actors, i.e., judging husbands and boyfriends vs. wives and girlfriends. The last two variables were manipulated through the use of four different questionnaires.

*Sample.* The sample consisted of 120 students in a number of introductory anthropology classes at the University of Pittsburgh. They were distributed evenly across the eight experimental conditions, with 15 subjects in each condition. There were 60 males and 60 females who participated in the study. Within each sex group, half the subjects responded to hypothetical husband-wife role pairs while the other half responded to hypothetical boyfriend-girlfriend role pairs. Furthermore, half the subjects responded to questionnaires wherein the male member of the hypothetical role pair was the actor and the female member was the object, while the other half responded to questionnaires wherein the wife or girlfriend was the actor and the husband or boyfriend the object.

**Questionnaire.** Four different questionnaires were used in the study. One version was designed to elicit the way in which husbands were expected to act towards their wives. Another version was designed to see how wives were expected to act towards their husbands. The other two versions were analogous to the first two except that boyfriends and girlfriends were substituted for husbands and wives as stimuli.

Each questionnaire contained 28 role differential items that described ways in which one member of a romantic dyad might be expected to act (or avoid acting) towards his/her partner; e.g.:

A husbands  
should \_\_\_:\_\_\_:\_\_\_:\_\_\_:\_\_\_:\_\_\_: should not  
feel responsible for his wife.

The task of the subjects was to judge each item on a seven point scale and indicate the degree to which the stimulus actor should act or feel towards his partner in the specified way. One might note that Triandis (1972) was interested in actual perceptions and therefore used *would-would not* on the bipolar ends of his scale. In this study, however, the focus was on ideal conceptions. Thus, the verbas *should-should not* were used instead.

The 28 items were designed to tap a wide range of attitudes that were deemed relevant in describing the relationship within romantically involved couples. Eleven of these items were derived from Rubin's (1970) loving and liking scales. The items that he found to best define his five loving and liking factors were adapted and included. In addition to these, 17 others items were included which were drawn mainly from the writings of Fromm, Maslow, and Erikson. The 28 items, as presented to the subjects, are listed in Table 1.

## FINDINGS

The subjects' responses to the 28 items were first factor analyzed in order to determine their basic underlying dimensions. Each item was scored from 1 to 7 and an inter-item correlation matrix was computed across all 120 subjects. A principal components analysis performed on the matrix resulted in the extraction of nine factors that accounted for 68 percent of the variance. These factors were then subjected to an orthogonal, varimax rotation. The nine factors were named: (1) growth and bond formation, (2) respect for the partner's independence, (3) similarity to partner, (4) sensitivity to partner, (5) respect for partner, (6) superficiality vs. depth, (7) absorption and dependence, (8) approach-avoidance towards partner, and (9) warmth without idealization. The rotated factor loading matrix appears in Table 1.

For each of the nine factors, a factor score was computed for each of the 120 subjects. The factor scores were derived by averaging, with equal weights, the scores on the variables that loaded highest and defined that particular factor. A variable loading .40 or higher on a factor was said to define that factor. Defining variables that loaded negatively were reverse scored before the computation of the factor scores.

The next step was to determine whether there was any variation within each of the nine factors that could be attributed to the three independent variables, either individually or in combination with one another. In order to achieve this, a series of nine 2 x 2 x 2 analyses of variance was performed, one on each of the nine factors (see Table 2). All three independent variables were treated as fixed factors. The results of this procedure for each of the nine factors will now be discussed.

**Factor 1: Growth and Bond Formation.** This factor was defined by five variables: touching is an important part of the relationship (.66), the relationship is growing and developing (.65), see

Table 1. Rotated Factor Loadings of the 28 Items (Decimal Points Omitted)

Items	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX
feel touching is important	66	21	07	20	09	17	22	-06	28
feel relationship is constantly growing and developing	65	18	15	04	24	-12	07	-02	28
see partner in new ways	64	10	02	11	24	-14	-15	-10	-06
recognize faults in partner	56	-04	-23	-16	02	24	01	10	50
find it hard to get along without partner	55	-22	30	-07	-08	-19	39	-07	-06
respect and encourage partner's independence	09	81	05	00	05	-03	-25	-02	-06
be pleased when partner pursues interests on his own	10	79	-16	10	13	-02	-13	-03	00
think of the same things	02	-28	69	21	09	-05	-07	05	08
feel like doing the same thing as partner	03	02	69	23	16	-05	15	14	-08
be similar to partner	23	06	66	-13	19	23	06	02	14
should not have secrets from partner	04	13	17	78	-09	-01	05	15	02
share concerns with partner	02	-12	-02	58	41	-04	15	00	39
satisfy partner's needs	36	-05	18	55	05	-05	43	-04	18
be sensitive to partner's needs	16	29	33	40	00	-07	25	-19	41
feel happy when partner succeeds	05	37	-25	40	35	04	11	04	12
think that partner is admired and respected	12	10	17	50	84	04	11	04	12
think that partner is well adjusted	12	11	18	-03	80	-13	-01	-05	12
think that partner's looks are important	29	-21	-14	16	23	45	51	24	-03
lose self in partner	-21	-18	29	10	-05	-41	41	02	31
feel miserable if separated from partner	19	04	-07	01	12	-78	17	10	-01
feel possessive towards partner	06	-17	00	-01	-06	-13	80	-03	08
feel responsible for partner	10	-05	03	24	21	-07	73	-18	03
do almost anything for partner	-09	-21	22	33	10	-01	54	04	34
look into partner's eyes when conversing	-02	13	14	-08	10	09	21	-80	12
want to be same kind of person as partner	-19	17	35	-17	24	02	30	57	12
confide in partner	12	00	14	08	15	01	10	09	77
have a playful relationship with partner	31	-05	-05	26	19	-21	06	03	49
have fun when with partner	32	-30	28	28	32	-20	20	-27	-01
Variance Explained by Factor	22%	10%	7%	6%	6%	5%	4%	4%	4%

Table 2. Analysis of Variance Summary Tables on Nine Factor Scores

Source	DF	Growth and Bond Formation		Respect for Partner's Independence		Similarity to partner		Sensitivity to partner		Respect	
		MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
A (Sex of Subject)	1	.341	<1	7.252	10.531*	.408	<1	.533	<1	3.008	2.257
B (Marital Status of Stimulus Couple)	1	.972	1.372	1.519	2.225	.579	<1	13.002	10.705**	1.268	<1
C (Sex of Actor)	1	.972	1.372	.469	<1	.075	<1	.019	<1	.490	<1
A x B	1	.048	<1	1.752	2.568	.023	<1	4.800	3.952*	.008	<1
A x C	1	1.728	2.552	3.741*	3.675	3.675	2.841	8.533	7.026**	.675	<1
B x C	1	.001	<1	.752	1.103	1.008	<1	1.302	1.072	.408	<1
A x B x C	1	.021	<1	.252	<1	.890	<1	.008	<1	.075	<1
Error	112	.709		.682		1.294		1.215		1.333	

Significant at  $p = .05$ Significant at  $p = .01$

(Table 2 continued)

Summary Tables

Source	Superficiality vs. Depth			Absorption and Dependence		Approach-Avoidance		Warmth without Idealization	
	DF	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
A (Sex of Subject)	1	.626	<1	1.337	1.003	4.033	2.937	1.408	2.076
B (Marital Status of Stimulus Couple)	1	1200	1278	7.008	5.280*	.133	<1	7.500	11.056**
C (Sex of Actor)	1	.033	<1	1.337	1.003	.033	<1	.008	<1
A x B	1	.948	1.009	.133	<1	2.408	1.754	.602	<1
A x C	1	3.115	3316	.448	7.089**	5208	3.793*	3.852	5.679*
B x C	1	1.481	1.577	.448	<1	.075	<1	1.302	1.919
A x B x C	1	.059	<1	.779	<1	.300	<1	.208	<1
Error	112	.939		1.332		1.373		.678	

Significant at  $p = .05$ Significant at  $p = .01$ 

partner in new ways (.64), recognize faults in partner (.56), and hard to get along without partner (.55). Analysis of variance performed on the factor scores derived from these 5 variables resulted in no significant main or interaction effects.

**Factor 2: Respect for Partner's Independence.** Two items clearly defined this factor: respect and encourage partner's independence (.81), and pleased when partner pursues interests of his/her own (.79). Analysis of variance performed on this factor yielded two significant effects. The first of these was a main effect between the sexes ( $F = 10.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with female subjects in general prescribing more respect for their partner's independence. However, a significant sex of subject x sex of stimulus actor interaction suggests that there is more to this main effect. Further analysis of this interaction revealed two interesting facts. The first of these was a difference in the degree to which male and female subjects thought wives and girlfriends should encourage independence in their males partners (5.65 vs. 6.43 on a seven point scale). The other was a difference between the sexes in the degree to which they think the other sex should respect their independence (6.27 vs. 5.65). Female subjects actually pre-

scribed more respect for female independence than male subjects prescribed for male independence.

**Factor 3: Similarity Between Partners.** Three items loaded highly on this factor: think of the same things as partners (.69), want to do same things as partner (.69), and be similar to partner (.66). The first two items were designed to tap Erikson's idea of calibrating cycles between intimate couples. The third item was adapted from Rubin's (1970) liking (as opposed to loving) scale. The analysis of variance performed on this factor yielded no statistically significant main or interaction effects.

**Factor 4: Sensitivity to Partner.** This factor was defined by five items: have no secrets from partner (.78), share partner's concerns (.58), satisfy partner's needs (.55), be sensitive to partner's needs (.40), and be happy when partner succeeds at something important to him/her (.40). All of these items seemed to reflect some amount of sensitivity to one's partner.

Variance analysis of this factor produced three significant effects. The first of these was a main effect on the marital status of the stimulus couples ( $F = 10.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Subjects thought that husbands and wives should express more

sensitivity to one another than boyfriends and girlfriends. A significant sex of subject x marital status of stimuli interaction ( $F = 3.95, p < .05$ ) revealed that this was especially true for male subjects.

There was also a significant sex of subject x sex of stimulus actor interaction ( $F = 7.03, p < .01$ ) which was of great interest. Further analysis of this interaction revealed a difference in the degree of sensitivity male partners were expected to exhibit by males and female subjects respectively (4.56 vs. 5.23). While both males and females agreed on the amount of sensitivity wives and girlfriends should display, female subjects prescribed more sensitivity from husbands and boyfriends than male subjects thought they should exhibit.

**Factor 5: Respect for Partner.** The items that defined this factor were: view partner as an admired and respected person (.84), view partner as being well adjusted (.80), and share concerns (.41). The first two items were adapted from Rubin's (1970) liking (as opposed to loving) scale and this factor essentially replicates his "respect" factor. Analysis of variance on this factor produced no significant main or interaction effects.

**Factor 6: Superficiality vs. Depth.** Three items loaded highly on this factor: partner's looks are important (.45), (should not) lose oneself in partner (-.41) and (should not) feel miserable when separated from one's partner (-.78). These three items appear to lie on a dimension of superficiality vs. depth in a relationship. While one might expect the subjects to prescribe more depth in the relationship between husbands and wives *vis-a-vis* boyfriends and girlfriends, this was not the case. Variance analysis on this factor yielded no significant effects.

**Factor 7: Absorption and Dependence.** This factor was defined by the following: feel possessive towards partner (.80), feel responsible for one's partner (.54), partner's looks are important (.51), satisfy partner's needs (.43), and lose oneself in one's partner (.41). Though the

computation of the factor scores was based on these five items, another item, find it difficult to get along without partner, had a borderline loading of .39.

The analysis of variance performed on this factor produced a significant main effect on the marital status of stimulus couple variable ( $F = 5.28, p < .05$ ). In general, subjects thought husbands and wives should be more absorbed in each other, relative to boyfriends and girlfriends.

In addition to this, there was also a significant sex of subject x sex of stimulus actor interaction effect ( $F = 7.09, p < .01$ ). Analysis of the cell means suggested that this interaction largely due to female subjects prescribing a low level of absorption in their partners for wives and girlfriends. This low rating contrasts sharply with the degree to which male subjects prescribed female absorption (3.50 vs. 4.27) on the one hand, and the degree to which female subjects prescribed male absorption (also 3.50 vs. 4.27), on the other.

These comparisons lead to two conclusions. First, while male and female subjects agree on the ideal amount of male absorption and dependence in a relationship, male subjects prescribe significantly more absorption and dependence than do female subjects when it comes to female absorption and dependence. Second, female subjects thought that husbands and boyfriends should be more absorbed in their wives and girlfriends than vice-versa.

**Factor 8: Approach-Avoidance.** This factor was the most difficult to interpret. Its two defining items were: want to be the same kind of person as partner (.57) and (should not) often look into partner's eyes when conversing (-.80). While factor scores were based on these items only, other items loading between .25 and .40 were examined to aid in the interpretation of the factor. There were two such items: (should not) have fun with the partner (-.27) and (should not) want to do the same things as partner (-.25). Hence, there were elements of both attraction and distancing towards one's partner.

An analysis of variance on this factor yielded a significant sex of subject x sex of stimulus actor interaction effect ( $F = 3.79, p < .05$ ). This was due to a difference in the way in which wives and girlfriends are judged by male and female subjects respectively (3.38 vs. 2.60). While there is agreement on the roles of husbands and boyfriends, male subjects prescribe more approach-avoidance behavior from wives and girlfriends than do females. It appears that the stereotype of female coyness is still very much alive among American college men today.

*Factor 9: Warmth Without Idealization.*

This factor included the following four items: be able to confide in partner (.77), recognize faults in partner (.50), have a playful relationship (.49), and be sensitive to partner's needs (.41). These items seem to convey a feeling of warmth while perceiving partner without idealizing him or her. They also have one other thing in common: Maslow (1970) found them to be typically present in love relationships among self-actualized persons.

The analysis of variance performed on this factor yielded two significant effects. First, there was a main effect on the marital status of the stimulus couples ( $F = 11.06, p < .01$ ). Not surprisingly, subjects ideally expected husbands and wives to display more warmth and perceive each other more accurately than boyfriends and girlfriends.

The other significant effect was a sex of subjects x sex of stimulus actor interaction ( $F = 5.68, p < .05$ ). Further analysis revealed a difference in the perception of male subjects *vis-a-vis* female subjects regarding the degree of warmth a man should display in a love relationship (5.34 vs. 5.92). While there is agreement on the female role in a relationship, female subjects thought that husbands and boyfriends, should display more warmth and less idealization than did male subjects. This interaction pattern was similar to that which emerged on the sensitivity factor.

## DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

The findings thus far presented can be grouped into three general categories: differences prescribed for married vs. unmarried couples, disagreement over the male and female roles in a relationship, and the question of male and female independence.

The subjects in this study ideally expected more *absorption and dependence*, as well as *warmth without idealization*, from married couples. In addition, male subjects also prescribed more *sensitivity* from them. In spite of many currently popular assaults on the institution of marriage, it seems that the college students in our sample still ideally expect more out of a married relationship *vis-a-vis* an unmarried relationship. There is also some hint that this difference in expectations may be more marked among male subjects than female subjects (cf. discussion on the sensitivity factor).

Of the nine factors, a significant sex of subject x sex of stimulus actor interaction appeared in five of them. Two of these revealed a disagreement between male and female subjects with regard to the male role in a relationship. Female subjects prescribed more *sensitivity* and *warmth without idealization* from husbands and boyfriends than male subjects thought they should exhibit. It appears that our female subjects expect men to be more emotionally involved in a relationship than men envision for themselves.

Two other interactions revealed disagreements over the female role. Male subjects prescribed more *absorption and dependence* as well as *approach-avoidance* (or coyness?) for wives and girlfriends than females thought they should exhibit. The finding on absorption and dependences suggests the male subjects' greater concern with a possessiveness that secures the bond. Women, however, think that men should express more clearly romantic behavior such as sensitivity and warmth than men currently show.

The interaction effect on the *respect for partner's independence* factor was the most

intriguing one. On this factor, men actually desired less independence than women were willing to grant them. Furthermore, women wanted men to respect their independence more than men wanted women to respect theirs. On this factor, therefore, both male and female subjects expressed views contrary to the traditional stereotype of a higher degree of male independence. Though somewhat surprising, this parallels a recent finding by Campbell (1975) that single (and presumably independent) women are actually more contented with life than single men across all ages.

The overall picture that emerges is one wherein our male subjects expect women to provide more of the warmth and romance in romantic relationships. The female subjects are more concerned about their independence and appear to expect man and woman to be eventually romantic in a love relationship.

In future research, it would be interesting to determine more specifically the extent to which the increasing independence of woman today is responsible for these discrepancies between the sexes. However, a consideration of Coppinger and Rosenblatt's (1968), Rosenblatt's (1970), and Dion and Dion's (1973) work leads to some

tentative conclusions. They contend that the degree of each individual's economic contribution to a romantic dyad affects the romantic orientation of the couple. It is possible that men operate with the notion that since they contribute to the material side of a relationship, it is only fair that women emphasize emotion. Women, however, may be thinking that their economic role is no less than that of their partner's and that the emotional (loving) input should be equal as well. This is consistent with Coppinger and Rosenblatt's (1968) idea that economically independent men and women show strong romantic love. Our data does not suggest that women are prescribing *less* emotion from females but rather *more* emotion from men.

Our findings indicate that changing social and economic roles are reflected in differing conceptions of ideal romantic behavior. That men appear reluctant to accept the new roles and consequently demand of women that they show more romantic behavior must prove to be a problem in many relationships. One cannot help but wonder to what extent these discrepancies between the sexes may be contributing to unhappy marriages and divorces.

#### REFERENCES

- Campbell, Angus (1975). "The American way of mating." *Psychology Today*, 8 (May): 37-43.
- Coppinger, Robert M. and Paul C. Rosenblatt (1968). "Romantic love and subsistence dependence of spouses." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 24: 310-319.
- Deckard, Barbara (1975). *The Women's Movement*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Dion, Kenneth L. and Karen K. Dion (1973). "Correlates of romantic love." *Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychology* 41 (February): 51-56.
- Erikson, Erik H. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Fromm, Erich (1956). *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Huber, Joan (1973). Changing Women in a Changing Society. *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (January, special issue).
- Komarovsky, Mirra (1973). "Cultural contradictions and sex roles: the masculine case." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (January): 873-884.
- Maslow, Abraham H. (1970). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Rosenblatt, Paul C. (1970). "Social structural correlates of importance of romantic love." Paper presented to the 1970 American Psychological Association convention.
- Rubin, Zick (1970). "Measurement of romantic love." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 16 (October): 265-273.
- Triandis, Harry C. (1972). *The Analysis of Subjective Culture*. New York: John Wiley.
- Welch, Susan (1975). "Support Among Women for Issues of the Women's Movement." *The Sociological Quarterly* 16 (Spring): 216-227.