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What is Love:

Personal Beliefs and Definitions Concerning the Concept of Love

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Abstract

The scientific study of love often focuses on developing theories of categories of love, sometimes popularized as "colors," "styles," or "attitudes." These studies attempt to define love and study it in a quantitative process and can lose sight of the complexity of the phenomenon in exchange for a reduced understanding of it. The present study serves to attempt to ameliorate this problem by adding to the small degree of love research that uses qualitative interviewing techniques that owe their development to Feminist research (Jackson, 2001). Using semi-structured interviews of 24 students at a Midwestern university in the United States, there is an attempt to understand personal theories and stories of love. Despite the vast diversity and experience of relationships and love, similarities across the participants and to findings of other studies are identified. Impacts on research in the field and suggestions for future research are detailed.

Introduction

The human experience of love has long been one studied by artists, poets, playwrights, and researchers alike. Research into love has crossed the assumed boundary between sociological and psychological research. Nonetheless, research has focused on using psychological approaches to study love and romantic relationships; such research studied whether scholars' developed hypotheses can be proven in the world. Few studies chose to use qualitative measures to better understand the personal experience of participants by investigating their stories and definitions of love. As such the purpose of this study is to expand on the use of qualitative research on love and relationships.

Research on love and relationships is greatly influenced by four overarching concepts in the field: Love styles, two varieties of love, biology, and attachment. Research on love styles was largely started by Hendrick & Hendrick (1986, 2006). Expanding on Lee's (1973) *Colours of Love*, their study created a Love Attitudes Scale to measure Lee's love styles in individuals. Those styles are eros, ludus, storge, pragma, mania, and agape. These roughly translate to passionate love, playful love, friendship/companionate love, logical love, possessive/dependent love, and self-less love, respectfully.

Two of these "colors" are studied more deeply in what is perhaps the most well-known model of love: the two varieties of passionate and companionate love. Passionate love is often defined as more sexual whereas companionate love consists more of friendship attachments within the romantic relationship. Studies have tested the differences between the two varieties of love: Sprecher & Regan (1998) found support for the hypothesis that satisfaction in a relationship is "more strongly associated with companionate love than with passionate love." As with the Love Attitudes Scale for Hatfield & Hatfield's Love Styles, Hatfield & Sprecher (1986)

designed a Passionate Love Scale to measure levels of passionate love in individuals.

Another investigative question in the study of relationships is how attachment processes in youth coincide with relationships. Developmental psychology teaches that infants develop one of three forms of attachment to their parents: secure, anxious, and avoidant (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Hazan and Shaver predicted that attachment in youth would lead to different experiences of love later in life. Other studies found that low attachment avoidance contributed to relationship satisfaction in long-distance relationships (Roberts & Pistole, 2009) and that attachment is a unique predictor independent of relationship conflict in depression (Marchand-Reilly, 2009).

Emerging research in love investigates how biology creates and impacts love. Specifically, such research examines different neurotransmitters, or chemicals in the brain, that impact the feeling of love. One such study suggested four genetic temperaments based on increased levels of dopamine, serotonin, testosterone, or estrogen (Fisher, Island, Marchalik & Rich, 2007). The neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin were also studied by Janov (Khamsi, 2001). Though in reviewing Janov's book on his notion of the biology of love, Khamsi asks "whether Janov's biological reductions enrich, or perhaps trivialize, our understanding of love and the mystery of life" (2001). While research on how love exists as a biological phenomenon is interesting, it does not depict or explain the complexities of how individuals actually experience and express their emotions.

While these studies may comprise the majority of research conducted in the field of love and romantic relationships, they are not inclusive. There have been a limited number of studies that utilize interviewing techniques to investigate love. There is clear reasoning for its use in the study of love: As Shafer illustrates in her research, romantic love should be viewed "as a social

construct that sometimes has various meanings in different cultures, and which may be expressed differently by people within the same culture" (2008). The complexities of the concept of love create further difficulties in its study. Qualitative research, having been the least utilized form of research for the study of love, would seem to be the solution to this issue. In their book *Designing Qualitative Research*, Marshall & Rossman maintained that qualitative research is specifically adept at "research that delves in depth into complexities and processes" (p. 46). They also acknowledged that interviewing is one of the most used tools of a qualitative researcher.

The goal of this study was to better understand the experience of love from individuals who have had first-hand experience, rather than to develop a theory and extrapolate the theory over their lives. The interview was identified as the best tool to gather the large amount of data and to create the rapport necessary for the uninhibited telling of personal stories of love and relationships. Interviews have been utilized for their voice-centered approach to "listen closely to the subtleties of human voices and stories" (Way, 2001) and Jackson deemed interview techniques as particularly feminist in their research and employed them to interview women on relationship violence and abuse (2001).

Thus the purpose and reasoning behind the current study can be understood. It should also be noted to the wary reader or investigator that qualitative research is not meant to be generalized to a population other than the current sample. Nonetheless, as Shafer (2008) impresses in her study, individual's stories and the identification of patterns in those stories may lead readers to better understand themselves through connections with the voices that lent themselves so aptly to this study.

Methods

Participants

24 college students in the United States participated as volunteers for extra credit in their psychology class. Of those 24 students, most of them ($n = 20$, 83%) were female. The majority of participants identified themselves as white or Caucasian ($n = 20$, 83%), where three (12%) self-identified as black or African-American and one (4%) identified as mixed Caucasian and African-American.

The mean age for participants was 20.04 years ($SD = 3.05$). The most common age was 18 ($n = 10$), followed by 19 and 21 ($n = 4$ and $n = 5$, respectfully). Two participants were somewhat outliers, with ages 27 and 31.

Following with the mode age as 18, the most common year in college for the participants in the study was first year, or freshman ($n = 11$, 46%). The other years were all grouped together, with second and third year at $n = 4$ and fourth year at $n = 5$.

Almost all of the participants self-identified as heterosexual ($n = 23$, 96%).

Procedure

Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one style with each participant in a small two-person office located in the Psychology building on the school's campus. The door to the office was closed to obtain privacy and to minimize audio distractions from other studies or the computer labs located on the same floor. The office itself had no other distractions as the walls were absent of visual posters or pictures. For a few of the first interviews a computer was in the room, but the researcher turned off the monitor to prevent a distraction from the computer's monitor screen. In two interviews participants were distracted by their own phones vibrating, as

they had neglected to turn off their phones, but the interview was able to continue with little issue.

Participants signed up on their own through an online system designed by the University Psychology Department for participation in research. Participants were treated in accordance with APA ethical standards. Informed consent for the interview, including the taking of written notes and the use of audio recording, was obtained prior to participation. Individuals were told that the interviews would likely have a cathartic effect and no negative side effects. Nonetheless, if they could choose not to answer a question or conclude the study immediately at any time. Only a few participants stated a desire to skip a question, and in one instance the participant changed her mind and answered it without prompting. Participants were also given the location and a phone number for the campus Counseling Services should they feel the need to combat possible negative effects from the study. Participant's emotional reactions ranged from extremely happy, including large amounts of laughter, to more negative as identified by quiet, inward reflection. Overall most reactions were positive and no lasting negative effects occurred because of the study.

Also during the consent form participants were notified that the interview would be entirely confidential. Participants were informed that they would be given a cover name for the transcripts and for any publications of the research and that they could pick a cover name if they so chose. No participant elected to pick their own cover name. During transcription, names of individuals and locations that might also compromise confidentiality of participants were changed to nonidentifying phrases (for example, "the last boyfriend" or "a mid-western college").

Finally, for protection of confidential information, all files were stored in secure locations

in a locked location off campus. The audio files were stored on a protected computer until typed transcripts could be made and then were properly deleted. The papers consisted of consent forms with signatures from participants and the investigator, demographics forms, and written notes taken by the investigator. The demographics forms and written notes were labeled by participant numbers (001 through 024) and were stored in separate locked and secure locations from the consent forms. No identifying information from any one set of documents could be used to link the document to any document in another set.

Due to constrictions on funds and equipment, analysis of the transcripts was done using a paper and highlighter procedure. Transcripts were read multiple times to establish a thorough familiarity with the data. Similarities between responses were highlighted and coded to establish patterns. Particularly common patterns suggested themes among the relationship definitions and histories of the participants.

Materials

Following the consent form, a demographic questionnaire was handed to each participant. To demographics received were gender, age, year in school, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Ethnicity was coded in accordance with the United States Census by separating the possible responses into Hispanic and non-Hispanic. In order to reduce limitations on responses, a space for age and race was given for participants to answer freely as opposed to a multiple-choice format.

The audio recordings for the interviews were conducted using an Olympus VN4100 Digital Voice Recorder. The Olympus Wave Player computer program was used to transfer the files from the recorder to a computer where they could be backed up. Because a digital recorder

was used, no hard tapes were required to be disposed of. Audio files were backed up onto two secure computers following the interviews and were then deleted from the recorder. The files were transcribed using Windows Media Player and Microsoft Works Word Processor.

The interview itself consisted of thirty-two questions on several different subtopics surrounding romantic relationships and love. The interview was broken up into three sections: the introductory questions, the specific relationship questions, and the final conclusion questions. The introductory questions asked a series of defining questions on different terms. For example, participants were asked "How do you define cheating?" More in-depth questions on love and cheating followed.

The core of the interview consisted of the specific relationship questions. Each participant was then asked more in-depth questions on each of the relationships they had experienced. For instance, these questions asked how they knew or met the person, what the opinion of their friends and relatives was for the relationship, how long the relationship lasted, and how intimate it had gotten. The final questions on relationships asked if the individuals benefited from the relationship, if they regret anything from the relationship, and if they would say the relationship was positive or negative.

The final conclusion questions had participants reflect back on each relationship, rather than one isolated in and of itself. Participants were asked if they regretted any of the relationships, if there is anything they would prefer to do over, if they have come to better understand the type of person they are attracted to through their relationships, if they have come to better understand themselves through their relationships, and to state if there is anything they look forward to or hope for in their future in terms of relationships. Finally, the interview was completed by asking participants to sum up their experience in just a few sentences.

Measures

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, previous studies involving love and romantic relationships used instruments such as the Love Styles Questionnaire (Davis & Latty-Mann, 1987; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Neto, 2007), or the Passionate Love Scale and Companionate Love Scale (Aron & Henkemeyer, 1995; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Kito, 2005; Sprecher & Regan, 1998). These scales were developed to test the theories of the authors and to prove the validity of those theories. Though these tests were often validated by the studies, the studies themselves failed to observe if the participants involved themselves agreed with the definition of love.

In the present study the concepts and measures of love, cheating, serious relationships, and other range of relationship seriousness are posed as questions for the participants to fill with their own definitions. The participants supplied their own definition and theories for these measures. Analysis of the transcripts for each of the twenty-four interviews was intended to identify any similarities between definitions and theories for these measures. Thus the present study can identify similarities among individuals through their personal lived experiences as opposed to the imposed definitions of a researcher.

Results and Discussion

Introductory Questions

Number of Relationships. Regardless of their response to the first question, participants were then asked how many relationships they had had over the course of their lives. The most

common answers were three relationships (*n* = 9, 38%) and four relationships (*n* = 7, 29%), and

answers ranged from one to six relationships. Connolly and McIssaac (2009) found similar

numbers with their study of adolescent relationships, as 44% of their participants reported having

3-5 relationships.

First Experienced Feelings. Reports of the first crush or romantic interest feelings

ranged from as young as preschool and as mature as tenth grade. There were similarities in

responses, however. The most common responses were sixth grade (*n* = 5, 21%) and fifth grade

(*n* = 4, 17%). The objects of these first affections varied from friends and the older siblings of

friends (or friends of older siblings), to popular classmates and even occasionally teachers.

Levels of Relationship Seriousness. The question about levels of relationships

seriousness yielded mixed results. Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents generally had two

categories for relationships: Those that are exclusive, or monogamous, and those that are not

exclusive. Specific terms included "going out," "dating," "being together" with another

individual, "seeing each other," "talking," and "kicking it." There was significant overlap

between terms and their definitions.

Definitions of Seriousness. Serious relationships were generally defined by emotional

intimacy, or   a deeper knowledge of the individual. Rene stated that "there's more of an

emotional connection; you share a lot more with the person," and Brittney added to this in her

interview that "the more you know about the person makes it more serious." This was agreed

upon in a study of self-disclosure in romantic and friend relationships. The study found that an

important distinction between close friendships and romantic relationships was an increased

level of disclosure (Kito, 2005). Of note, only twice was sexual intimacy mentioned as being an

essential characteristic of serious relationships.

Types of Relationships. The question posed to participants about types of relationships yielded interesting results. Several individuals identified a difference between serious, exclusive relationships, and a kind of nonexclusive relationship: The so-called "open" relationship. Zoe detailed open relationships as a relationship where "you guys are official but you still go out and date other people." Surprisingly, however, was the other finding. The most common positive response to the question was that there are two types of relationships: the sexual, passionate ones, and the relationships based on friendship. Evan expressed the conclusions of these participants when he stated that these relationships "tend to be more serious than just the purely sexual relationships." Anne extended these responses to their logical conclusion in considering these romantic relationships based on friendships as "companionship, really." This question revealed that many of these participants seem to agree with the model of two types of love: Companionate and passionate. These participants seem to support the findings of one study that relationship satisfaction is more strongly associated with companionate love than with passionate love (Sprecher, 1998).

Definition of Love. Subjects supplied many different definitions for love, but three of these were most prominent. Those were: Not wanting to be without the other person ($n = 7$), being willing to do anything for that person ($n = 8$), and caring for them ($n = 10$). Maya put it well when she said:

"Love is not really a feeling how most people think, it's really an action, like are you

patient with that person, willing to do anything for them, put them before yourself. Do

you try to understand them. Showing them that you actually care."

Being willing to do anything for a person was the second most mentioned definition of love.

Amy described love as being "willing to help them out even though it might hurt you some."

Other notable but less mentioned definitions are the ability to see past the other's flaws, put them before one's self, and that the person is a best friend; another possible connection to the companionate love model. Finally, of note is the response of Kathleen on her belief of work in a love relationship:

"I think you can fall out of love, and I think that happens a lot, especially with marriages. Because I don't think you can feel the same way all the time about that person, and you need to work on things and go into it knowing, almost expecting that you're going to fall out of love with the person, know that you need to work out certain things and understand that you really care about each other deep down even though sometimes you won't feel that way at the moment."

Definition of Cheating. When asked how they defined cheating, most participants ($n = 18$, 75%) concluded that cheating involves not only physical but also emotional aspects. Many participants ($n = 14$, 58%) also responded that cheating can be defined by motives, and that lying is the most important aspect that identifies other behaviors or emotions as cheating ($n = 6$). As stated by David:

"Doing something with another guy or girl that your romantic partner doesn't approve of. Sexual, kissing, any of that stuff. I don't find hanging out with them cheating unless you're trying to hide it from them."

Thus if one is lying to his or her partner about behaviors or emotions concerning other people, those behaviors or emotions should be considered suspect due to the feelings of necessity toward deceit.

In a relationship, individual definitions are of increased importance. Couples in relationships have found that differences in their definitions can cause issues. Karen states such

problems in a relationship she was in that broke up once before she got back together with him:

"This is where it gets tricky. When we were in our little breakup I was with somebody

else at that time. I don't think it was cheating because we weren't together at that time,

but he thought it was cheating."

Karen and her boyfriend had different definitions of cheating. She believes, and many

individuals agree, that her actions cannot be considered cheating because she was not in a

relationship at the time. But her boyfriend and others disagree, and because he considered it

cheating difficulties have continued to exist in their relationship.

   Discovering Cheating. Two additional findings came from the questions on cheating.

First, two participants stated that how they found out about their significant other's cheating

would greatly impact their ability to continue the relationship. This differed from the

findings of Gunderson & Firrari (2008). Evan stated that if he was honestly and personally

admitted by his significant others it would be easier to "let those negative feelings towards it

go." Jillian's story supports this. Although she did not cheat on her significant other, she

was tempted to. About the incident, she said:

"I just removed myself from the situation. And I was honest about it and I told them. He

was cool about it. Happy I handled it the way I did and was honest to him about it. It

drew us closer together."

The other finding from the cheating question was on discovering cheating using the internet.

Two individuals discovered their significant other's cheating behavior using internet networking

websites such as Myspace and Facebook. On this, Brittney stated: "No one should have a

Facebook because people catch you all the time on that."

   Having Been Cheated On. A slight majority of subjects responded positively to having

been cheated on in romantic relationships ($n = 13$, 54%). This number could be as high as 17 (71%), as four participants believe they have been cheated on but were unable to gain proof for their beliefs. Regardless, of the thirteen who knew for certain they had been cheated on, four (31%) had been cheated in more than one relationship. It could be that some individuals are more likely than others to cheat on their significant others, and that some individuals are more likely to become attracted to those types of people. Zoe suggests this later in her interview: "I think my type was the cheating type and that's why I was so prone to get into those relationships." The percentage of participants who had been cheated on repeatedly might suggest further research in the area.

First Relationships

Interview questions on relationships began with asking about the first relationships. As first relationships can often times be special relationships, analysis of these relationships was taken separately as well as conjunctly with the whole of the interview.

School Year/Age of Relationship. Participants' stated time of their first relationship ranged from fifth grade to freshman year of college. The most common response was ninth grade, given by seven of the participants (30%). It should not come as a surprise to adolescent researchers that the time most likely to see the beginning of the first relationship for youth is around late middle school and early high school, around the ages of 13-16 years of age. Of note is the participant who stated that her first relationship began in fifth grade. While this might seem as an outlier to some and might raise flags as to whether such a young relationship should be consider important to this research, said relationship lasted around four years in length. This is of note because not only does this prove the relationship should be included, but also because it was much longer in length than the average length for such young relationships.

Length of Relationship. Of her relationship, Cassandra said "We dated for nine months, which is weird for a first relationship." Cassandra's statement was agreed with some of the other participants, who reflected that it is uncommon for initial relationships to last longer than a month or two. Looking at the data, however, the majority (*n* = 12, 52%) of those relationships lasted between six months and a year, during the time that Cassandra stated was weird that hers had lasted so long.

Benefiting from the Relationship. There was a higher percentage of positive responses by participants as to having benefited from first relationships (85%) compared to the other relationships (74.4%). This discrepancy is even greater if the current relationships are accounted for and not included in the data; this drops the percentage from 74.4% to 63.3%. The responses also varied from those about later relationships in that they focused more on confidence and learning "how relationships work," as Peter stated in his interview. Kathleen repeats a popular statement of the culture when she states that she believes everyone must have a "first love" to experience early in life:

> "If you go through t too late, if you wait might not cope as well. As you get older you
> might think 'oh my gosh I need to get married,' and the toll might be worse on you than
> if you were younger"

Negative Consequences of the Relationships. Negative consequences mentioned also differed for first relationships than for later relationships. The negative consequences most mentioned were about friends and growing up. By friends, participants spoke of losing friends because of being in the relationship or losing friends when the relationship ended because their significant other was in the same group of friends, and the break-up created awkwardness within the group. This was also stated by some participants in the Shafer study (2008). On growing up,

Maggie said: "I miss, I didn't have the growing experience that my fiends did, not having that experience, but I don't regret anything." Maggie is quite positive in not regretting it, but nonetheless considers it a possible negative. Peter agreed with this statement in his own interview: "I guess I would enjoy being single more. Being single is not a terrible thing."

While there were many similarities in explanations of negative consequences, nonetheless more participants stated that there were no negative consequences. This differed from Shafer's qualitative study of women's romantic relationship experience. She found that most of her participants were more wary of romantic relationships after past relationships where they had been "burned" (2008). In contrast, much less of the individuals in the present study indicated negative experiences, and only one who did mentioned being guarded with their feelings due to an earlier experience of having been burned.

Overall Positive or Negative Evaluation. The final finding of the analysis of responses on first relationships was in regards to the final question in the relationship section: Whether or not the relationship in question was considered positive or negative in retrospect. Interestingly, there was a higher percentage of positives for the first relationships (80%) compared to later ones (69%, or 60.9% if the current relationships are excluded).

General Relationship Questions

Meeting (or Knowing) the Future Significant Other. One of the first questions asked about relationships in the interview was how the participant had met their significant other. Participants gave various stories of meeting significant others. Through analysis, different means were identified, though single relationships often fit under several categories. For instance, Rene met one of her boyfriends through friends, but the limited acquaintance did not

evolve into a romantic relationship until the two had class together. Specific categories

nonetheless stood out among the rest: Nearly all of the individuals met their significant others

through friends. Nearly as many relationships existed with individuals in the same school ($n =$

22), with more than half of those having grown or initiated through sharing the same class, as

Rene's had. Brittney said of one such relationship:

> "I don't know what guys do, but somehow they have a secret way of getting to know
>
> people, like while studying throwing in questions like 'what do you do for fun?' which
>
> isn't really studying, it's more like talking, and it never gets anything done."

Less common responses for meeting significant others were sports clubs, bars and dance clubs,

street and dormitory neighbors, and through online resources. Only a few relationships were

described as starting immediately after making the acquaintance; participants responded that they

became friends with those individuals first in almost all significant relationships. Whether the

friendship evolved for platonic reasons and became romantic or was initiated for romantic

motives varied by individual. This study was unable to gather data on this variable, though it

could be interesting for future study.

     Duration of Relationship. When questioned about the duration of their relationships,

seven relationships included the concept of dating "on and off" with an individual: Where one or

more breakups are followed by reconciling and continuing the relationship. Consistent with

findings from research done by Dailey et al. (2009), stories of on-off relationships were more

negative in nature than positive. The only relationship Zoe stated she regretted was a

relationship of this nature: "I would say I do regret my second one. Mostly because I took him

back so many times and I was an emotional wreck."

Reactions of Friends and Relatives. Participants were asked if their friends and relatives knew of each relationship, and if so, what their reactions to the relationship were. Participants responded that nearly all significant others in relationships were liked by friends and relatives alike. There were eight reports of parents not giving their opinions on the significant others and no reports of friends; parents seemed more likely to withhold judgment or their thoughts on the relationship than friends. Parents were also twice as likely to not be aware of the relationship. When friends were unaware of the relationship, participants always cited the relationship's low level of seriousness as why their friends did not know of it. However, parents were more likely to not know of the relationship because it was a secret from them than because the relationship was less serious. Cassandra's parents did not allow her to date until she was sixteen; she dated someone regardless and simply kept it a secret. In addition, one of her later boyfriends experienced the same situation with his parents. Shania had a different reason to hide her relationship from her parents:

"I didn't want my family to know because they're so nosy. They don't like to think of

me having any kind of relationship with people because I'm the smart one."

The impressions and opinions of friends and relatives can be quite important. Speaking of her current relationship, Beth said that her family liked her boyfriend, and because of that "Everything's just falling into place." Negative feelings from parents or friends can seriously hinder how significant others spend their time together. One of Rene's relationships experienced this issue: "I couldn't hang out with [my boyfriend] and my friends because they didn't get along. I wasn't able to combine time; I could only have separate time." In their study of the reasons for adolescent relationship breakups, Connolly and McIsaac (2009) found that the opinions of parents and friends were rarely among those reasons. The stories of the participants

in this study suggest that those opinions indeed rarely affect dissolution decisions; nonetheless, it is clear that these opinions do negatively affect the relationships.

  Intimacy in Relationships. The interview also asked how intimate participants got with their significant others in the relationship. Participants responded overwhelmingly that their relationships had gotten "very intimate," "about as intimate as you can get," or simply stated that they "had sex." It is interesting to note that after the initial relationship in these participant's lives where sexual intimacy occurred, it seemed that intimacy was more likely to occur in subsequent relationships. For some participants it was noted that sexual intimacy in later relationships happened sooner in those relationships when there were more previous relationships when sexual intimacy occurred. Studies on the effect of previous sexual intimacy on the decision and timing for future sexual intimacy in relationships are lacking. Further, more focused and in-depth research on this question is needed as it was beyond the scope of this study.

  Relationship Dissolution. When asked how relationships ended, there were three distinct themes. The most common was that there was a loss of interest in the other person. Anne stated that in one of her relationships that interest was lost because they "never really got to that companionship…We ended up breaking up because it wasn't worth it," whereas Beth explained about losing interest that "You kind of get bored. I get bored really easily." Loss of interest was a significant percentage of reasons for relationship dissolution provided by participants in the study by Connolly and McIsaac (2009). That study also found that long distance in a relationship and the occurrence of cheating were mentioned as reasons for relationship dissolution. Although only mentioned by 10% participants in the Connolly and McIsaac study, cheating ($n = 13$) and distance ($n = 11$) were mentioned by many participants in this study; almost as often as loss of interest.

Overall Positive or Negative Evaluation. It was mentioned previously that participants were much more likely to evaluate positively the relationships they first experienced (80%) than later ones (60.9%). Nonetheless, the percentage of positive responses of relationships was still the majority. A response that was given for overall evaluation of later relationships was not given for first relationships: that the relationships were neutral, without positive or negative feelings strong enough to decide one way or the other. In fact, a neutral evaluation of relationships by participants occurred almost as often ($n = 7$) as a negative evaluation ($n = 11$).

Final Questions

Regrets from Relationships and Doing things Over. Participants were asked two similar but differing questions: if there was anything from the relationships they regret and if there was anything they would prefer to do over. It was reasoned that some participants may consider these two questions to be the same, whereas others may not: they may agree that they would prefer to do something over but not consider this to be a regret. Despite being two questions, similarities existed between participant's answers. Most participants responded that they did not regret anything, but did in fact wish they had done some things differently and would do them over if they had the chance. The most common response for both questions concerned sexual intimacy. As Karen explained, "Now I have an idea of, and now I don't want to be intimate with somebody until I know for a fact it's going somewhere." Other responses were quite varied: regretting cheating in a relationship, not agreeing on the direction and seriousness of the relationship with the significant other, and taking the significant other back after breakups too many times. As Cassandra exemplifies in her interview, most participants said they did not have

any regrets: "I think that they're all really beneficial to me because they all led up to what I have now."

Understanding Type through Relationships. This question instructed participants to think back on their answer to the introductory question concerning the "type" of person they are attracted to. For those who answered to having a type ($n = 17$), they were asked if their experienced relationships helped them to further understand their type. Fifteen of those participants responded in the affirmative. Kathleen illustrates how her type came about because of relationship experiences: "Certain things I wouldn't have thought about: Like being reliable. Until I dated someone that wasn't reliable, that wouldn't have been one of the criteria I would have listed [as my type]."

Understanding Self through Relationships. Continuing with the previous question's theme of learning and understand through relationships, participants were asked to consider if they have come to better understand themselves due to their relationship experiences. Sixteen participants responded that they have, whereas only six participants responded in the negative. Two participants explain their beliefs particularly well. Peter stated that "I think people like other people who are a lot like them. So seeing what I like in girls helps me see what I'm kind of like." Cassandra mentioned an exchange of learning and growing in relationships:

"When you have someone you're that close to they can be completely honest with you and blunt and let you know when you're doing something stupid and when you're doing something great because sometimes you're naïve to these things. He helps me grow and become a better person and improve things I need to, and vice versa."

The participants who responded positively support the conclusion of a recent study of relationships where students who had experienced love felt they had grown in their sense of self due to the experience (as cited in Shafer, 2008).

One participant disagreed with the majority opinion. Evan felt a relationship had not helped him better understand himself, but had hurt him: "My third relationship confused my self-image because of uncertainty." While he was the only participant who mentioned this in this study, it is possible others may agree of with him. As studies of love and relationships focus on the development of inter- and intrapersonal aspects of the self, it would be beneficial to investigate further the impact on individuals such as Evan who experience relationships that harm rather than help the individual's growth.

Participant's Summary of Relationship Experience. The final question of the interview was for participants to sum up their relationship experience in just a few sentences. This question occasionally garnered oft-said relationship clichés, but just as often brought forth brilliant insights from participants. Almost every participant mentioned that relationships are an important experience to grow interpersonally and intrapersonally, as Elizabeth mentions: "As much as it is about you and another person, when you've come out of it you've learned the most about yourself." Zoe acknowledged that often individuals do not wish to enter into relationships because of the negative consequences: "I can understand people who don't want to be in a relationship ever because that's kind of how I felt in the beginning." Brittney, however, produced the most intriguing insight in her interview:

"I have learned that to overcome obstacles such as relationships, you have to be patient, stress-free, and know exactly what you want. Because if you don't know exactly what you want, then it's not going to get you anywhere and you're just screwed in the end."

Individuals who decide they need to be single for a while to better understand themselves before entering a fresh relationship may relate to Brittney's statement. When asked if she knows what she wants in relationships, she replied "No, that's still a problem."

Conclusion

Relevance to Other Studies

The stories, definitions, and theories provided by participants in this study often reflected the theories of researchers in the study of love and romantic relationships. While the beliefs of the participants in this study are not generalizable, it is intriguing to identify psychological and sociological theories in the stories of everyday individuals.

Self-Disclosure. The study by Kito (2005) on self-disclosure in relationships found that there was a greater level of self-disclosure in romantic relationships than in friend relationships. This finding was agreed upon by many of the participants. Emotional intimacy, characterized by knowledge of the individual and openness with them, was the most often mentioned definition of serious relationships.

Companionate and Passionate Relationships. One of the most popular models of love is the differentiation between the companionate or friendship love and the passionate or sexual love (Sprecher, 1998). Perhaps its popularity explains why the most common answer as to types of relationships reflected this model. Nonetheless, that many everyday individuals agree with this model and identify with it in their lives bodes well for the research done in the area.

Discovering Cheating in a Relationship. Finally, when giving their stories of cheating or responding hypothetically, two participants claimed that how they found out about the cheating

would greatly impact their ability to continue the relationship. Their responses disagreed with

the findings of Gunderson & Firrari (2008) on the importance of how they learned from the

cheating. Gunderson & Firrari determined that an apology was the most important element.

Participants in this study also cited the means of discovery, as learning of cheating through

friends, the internet, or (what seems to be the worst from participant stories) through the other

man or woman.

Negative Consequences of Relationships. When asked of negative consequences of

relationships, far fewer participants indicated any negatives than expected. Differing from

Shafer's (2008) interviews with women on relationships, only one individual stated that she felt

guarded in her feelings due to a past relationship, whereas this was a specific conclusion of

Shafer's study. Similar to her study, however, were that the most commonly cited negative

consequence was the loss of friends or of time for personal growth during adolescence. Shafer

found that this was cited by numerous women.

Findings for Future Studies

There were other findings from this study that seem to point to a gap in the field of

research. These interesting findings could be the introductions to future studies on love and

relationships.

Open Relationships. Little research has been done on the concept of "open"

relationships; relationships where two individuals are together but are free to date other people.

Open relationships were described by participants as types of relationships they differentiate

from the more common monogamous relationship, and other participants expressed their own

stories of experienced open relationships. Further research on the similarities and differences of

these relationships and how they impact individuals in them should be conducted.

Internet in the Discovery of Cheating. The study of the internet and its impact on relationships is a new field for research in love and relationship interaction. What may be becoming a bigger trend was discovered in the stories of two individuals in the study: Discovering a significant other's act of cheating through networking websites such as Myspace and Facebook. Such sites change how individuals interact before and during relationships and even how they end those relationships. The stories of these two individuals indicate that networking sites can reveal the lies of a cheating significant other as well. More research on the variety of impacts that the internet and networking sites in particular have on relationships further than just their formation is recommended.

Limitations of Study

There are obviously limitations to this current study. It has been indicated that because it is a qualitative study using in-depth interviews it is difficult to generalize to larger populations. This is a known caveat of qualitative research methods. Despite this, readers may identify with the definitions and stories provided by participants. Researchers may benefit from the anecdotal responses of participants that reflect their agreement with research in the field. In addition, researchers may benefit from the intriguing discoveries of this study that may lend themselves as introductory findings for future studies.

Another issue with interviews is what participants choose to reveal in their responses. For the most part this did not seem to be a problem, but in at least one case it did lend to some confusion. Although participants were asked how many total relationships they had, some gave the number of total relationships while others gave only the number of more serious

relationships. Because it was unclear what relationships participants considered in their responses, it was sometimes difficult to calculate percentages for responses to questions. Thus in many instances a general indicator of "most common" or "majority" response was given where percentages of relationships was more preferred.

Finally, there were limitations of the demographics for the study. Participants were recruited through an extra credit system of the Psychology department at the university. There was no attempt to recruit specific demographics for the study, but nonetheless the sample was not as diverse as desired. The majority of participants were female and Caucasian, with only a small percentage of the participants representing males or African American populations. No other race or ethnicities were represented, and all but one individual were heterosexual. This is likely because the Psychology student pool at the university is comprised prominently of females and Caucasians, thus resulting in the sample to be skewed in the similar manner. A study would benefit from having more time and resources than the present one in order to obtain the more desired sample of participants.

The age of participants could be another limitation of this study. Readers may note that the ages of participants mainly ranged from 18 to 22. This younger age might limit the participants in experience. For instance, the two older participants (ages 27 and 31) experienced events such as marriage, cohabitation, and even childbirth and parenting that the majority of the participants were too young to experience. Nonetheless, most participants had experienced three relationships in their young life, everyone had felt romantic love for another, many could accurately and concretely define those feelings, and almost every participant had been sexually intimate in a relationship. Thus, though the young age could be a limitation on the experience of participants and thus their definitions of love, it seems that the participants in this study have

ample experience in the area of romantic relationships. Nonetheless, a complementary study of older individuals would benefit the research to illustrate similarities and differences with the findings of the current study.

Summary

The present study used qualitative interviewing processes and a semi-structured interview to direct questions for a wide range of topics and responses. Questions elicited interesting stories of anticipated and surprising responses.

The present sample of young adults suggests that there is a diverse experience of romantic relationships for individuals even as young as their late teens and early twenties. Many individuals cited companionate, friendship relationships as being different and more serious than more sexual, passionate relationships. Definitions of love most commonly mentioned a greater degree of self-disclosure, of which research connects with more positive friendships and romantic relationships (Kito, 2005). Sexual intimacy was an aspect of many of the discussed relationships, but very rarely was noted as a necessary component of a serious relationship. Finally, participants revealed strong similarities in the final question. When asked to sum up their relationship experience, nearly every participant stated that despite any negatives in their past they believe strongly that romantic relationships are a growing experience that every individual should have.

While coming to better understand the theories of love from the prospective of those who subjectively experience, this study came to conclusions in support of numerous studies and suggesting the needs of even more research. Through studying love using a personal, qualitative approach, connections were made in interviews and conclusions of inter-participant similarities

and differences in stories and theories were able to be drawn. Future research using a larger and more refined set of interview questions and a larger, more diverse sample of participants is encouraged, as are the expanding of discovered gaps in the literature.